

RUIN

By Master Slytherin

Summary: AU. Post-DH. Tricked into falling through the veil, Harry finds himself in an alternate dimension where the First War continues to rage and the people he thought he lost are alive and well. Harry thought killing Voldemort would take a matter of days this time. He was wrong. No slash.

As a pre-emptive strike, Harry and Lily will become close in this story but there will be absolutely no Harry/Lily pairing. The actual pairing will become apparent in the second instalment; it will be a so-called 'rare' pairing that I don't want to give away just yet for plot-related reasons.

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Genre: Action/Suspense

Era: Halloween 1981 onwards

Main Characters: Harry, Dumbledore, Lily, Andromeda, Nymphadora

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Chapter I: Veil

Harry sat, almost horizontal, on the couch. His feet were resting on the coffee table in front of him. Sunlight filtered in through the translucent silk curtains. Darker, thicker curtains, more beige than orange, framed the windows and from his vantage point, Harry could see the pulley system that opened and closed them. His cat Spotty, a birthday present from Hermione earlier in the year, was lounging on the windowsill. Opposite him was his pride and joy — the forty-two inch television screen that Harry had recently bought and mounted on the beige wall.

His right hand held the remote control and was flicking through hundreds of channels, while his left was rested on his godson's far shoulder. He glanced at Teddy, who had recently taken to copying Harry and, being a Metamorphmagus, was particularly skilled at doing it. His jet black hair stuck up at the back as Harry's did and he even had the brilliant green eyes. He could not quite manage the scar, though. It could be disconcerting, but Andromeda had assured Harry it was a phase he would grow out of.

Harry turned back to the television and finally found the channel he wanted — the one showing the England game. He cursed — he had missed most of the match and England were a goal down to Slovakia of all teams.

"Who are we supporting, Uncle Harry?" piped Teddy.

"You see that shirt you're wearing?" said Harry, tapping the white England top he had bought Teddy some weeks ago. "That's the England shirt; you're supporting England."

"Oh yeah!"

Gerrard, England's talisman midfielder, had flitted the ball through to Owen, a short striker, who had turned his marker. Only one defender stood between he and the goal. Harry leaned forward. Owen wrong-footed the last defender, leaving only the goalkeeper in his way. Harry raised his arms expectantly. No! The beaten defender had tackled Owen from behind and brought him down.

“Penalty!” yelled Harry. “That cheating bastard’s got to get a red!” Suddenly, Harry remembered that Teddy was with him and bit his lip. “Err, don’t use language like that, Teddy.”

“Bastard?” said Teddy, putting on a mask of innocence.

“No, I said don’t say it,” said Harry, thinking with dread of what Dromeda would do to him if she heard Teddy swearing.

“Bastard! Bastard! Bastard!”

“Theodore,” said Harry warningly, “you don’t want me to call grandma, do you?”

Teddy looked at Harry sullenly and crossed his arms.

“Don’t get in a huff, now! There might be a penalty.”

“What’s a pelanty?”

“Penalty,” corrected Harry. “When one player does something naughty in that box next to the goal, the other team get a penalty. Look, I think we’re going to get one!”

The referee, who had been swarmed by white shirts, pointed to the spot before giving the offending defender a yellow card. It was the turn of the blue shirts to surround the official, but he waved them away, leaving them no option but to watch, crest-fallen, as Owen placed the ball on the penalty spot.

“Owen has got to slot this one away,” the commentator was saying, “not like the one he hit over the bar for Liverpool at the weekend. The weight of a nation is on his shoulders...”

Harry was sitting on the edge of his seat, his hands clasped together as if in prayer, his chin resting on the bridge of his knuckles. Owen took three steps back from the ball and looked up at the goal.

“Come on Owen,” mumbled Harry.

“Come on Owen,” said the commentator, throwing neutrality to the wind.

Owen ran up and hit the ball straight down the middle. The Slovakian goalkeeper committed to a spectacular dive to his right. The net rippled.

“Yes!” Harry cried.

“Yes!” cried the commentator.

Harry jumped to his feet and punched the air. He only wished Dean or Ron was with him. He settled for grabbing Teddy and lifting him into the air, much to the delight of the six year-old.

“Tickle time!” squealed Teddy.

Harry carefully placed his godson on the sofa and crouched into his accustomed lion position. Teddy stood on the sofa and slashed the air as if his hands were claws. He bore his teeth, which he had managed to sharpen like fangs. Harry gave a low growl and slowly stalked towards Teddy.

Needing no further encouragement, Teddy leapt on to his godfather, who caught him in the air and wrestled him to the ground. Once he had Teddy pinned to the floor, Harry began to tickle him mercilessly, only relenting when Teddy turned a worrying shade of red.

“Are you alright there, Ted?” said Harry, concerned.

“Again! Again!”

“Hang on, I need to go to the toilet. Give me a shout if it looks like we’re going to score.”

“But we’re not playing!”

“I’m talking about England,” said Harry, shaking his head.

“Oh, yeah, ok!”

“Oh, and keep an eye on Spotty for me; she’s been acting very strangely these past few weeks. Make sure you don’t let her out, ok?”

Harry was halfway to the door when Teddy said, “Uncle Harry...” Harry turned to the television expectantly, but England were knocking the ball across their back four. He switched his attention to his godson, who was looking at Harry with the same puzzled expression he used before he asked an awkward question.

“Yeah?” said Harry, fearing the worst.

“Why don’t you love Aunt Ginny anymore?”

Harry froze. “Where did you hear that?”

“I heard Grandma and Mrs Weasley talking one day.”

Harry frowned. “There are different types of love, Teddy. I still love Aunt Ginny because she’s one of my best friends. Just because a man doesn’t kiss a woman, doesn’t mean he doesn’t love her. I want you to remember that, alright?”

Teddy looked more confused than ever but nodded furiously. Harry knew he appreciated being told the undistorted truth; Dromeda tended to talk to him as a six year-old should, but after all the things that were hidden from him in his own childhood, Harry tried to make Teddy as world-aware as possible.

Harry drifted to the toilet, red hair dominating his thoughts. It had been going so well with Ginny in the two years after Hogwarts, but after he had fully qualified as an Auror and she had received a contract from the Harpies, the troubles had begun. Harry was assigned night shifts while Ginny trained during the day. They barely saw each other and, as a result, became strangers. Then came the worst part. Realising they were drifting apart, they both tried to paper over the cracks. Harry had never been so uncomfortable in his life, and he was sure she had felt the same.

It was only after a long chat with Hermione two years ago and Harry had broken up with her that their relationship resembled what it had once been. No longer were they forcing it to work, and suddenly they were close friends again, seeing each other every couple of weeks at least. If Harry was honest with himself, the only person who was not happier because of it was Mrs Weasley.

Harry returned to an empty living room five minutes later.

Smiling, he said, "where can Teddy be, I wonder?"

Harry crept up to the curtains, Teddy's usual hiding place, and flung them aside as quickly as he could, but there was nobody there. He checked the cupboard, behind the couch, underneath the dining table; everywhere. Getting a little worried, he performed the *homenum revelio* and his worse fear was realised; he was alone.

Panicking, Harry flung the curtains aside and scanned the small, well-kept garden. It had not been touched. He felt as though a cold hand had gripped his heart and was squeezing ever tighter.

"Teddy!" Harry called.

No answer.

"Teddy, come out now."

No answer.

Harry spun around, a whirl of places he could possibly be hiding passing through his mind's eye. What if he had wandered out into the main road? What if he had let Spotty out and ran after her? What if he had performed some dangerous accidental magic? What if he had been kidnapped?

His blood ran cold.

Former Death Eaters had attempted to assassinate him more times than he cared to remember. What if they had given up on attacking Harry directly and gone for his family?

Calm down, thought Harry, calm down and think clearly.

But he could not calm down. They had taken Teddy, his Teddy! They had taken his godson. He knew it, he could feel it.

Suddenly, there was a flash of red light and a gnarled piece of parchment appeared, hanging in the air as if on a piece of invisible string. Harry snatched it and read:

Potter,

I have your godson. Say "victory" if you want to see him again.

Checkmate. He had no choice but to say, "Victory."

A familiar tug of the navel and his living room disappeared. He reappeared at the bottom of what appeared to be a great stone pit. He was surrounded by sloping tiers of benches, like courtroom ten, or even a reasonably large football stadium. He knew where he was. He was standing on the dais where the veil stood.

A glance over his shoulder confirmed his fears. There was the ancient archway, the ragged veil hanging from it, fluttering very slightly despite the cold, still air.

Harry tore his eyes from the veil and considered a plan of action. It was no ordinary Death Eater grunt he was facing, their infiltration of the Department of Mysteries told him that much. And it was evidently one who enjoyed irony. There was no other reason why he would kidnap Harry's godson and lure Harry to the veil room. The parallels with Sirius were too profound.

Assess and evaluate.

Whoever it was, they were keeping themselves hidden. Harry stepped down from the dais and caught a sickening sight. An Unspeakable Harry only knew as Croaker lay dead inches from his feet. It had been messy; the wounds on his arms and legs told Harry he had been tortured for information. The permanent look of fear

locked in the man's ageing face told him it was the Killing Curse that had finished him off. So the Death Eater had somehow managed to put Croaker under the Imperius. He had then released him from the spell and tortured him for information.

So it was a Death Eater who had nothing to lose. But if he had nothing to lose, what did he have to gain from Harry?

Harry scanned the huge chamber for any signs of disturbance. The Death Eater was lurking somewhere, Disillusioned, with Teddy. The thought of it made Harry feel sick.

Suddenly, a cat appeared mere metres from him and, before it could so much as move, a blinding jet of green light came from the darkness and struck its arched back. In the light, Harry recognised it. It was Spotty. But as the curse struck her, she transformed into a young, blank-faced witch.

Harry ran a hand through his hair and swore. He should have had the cat checked out. He had gone through all the trouble of making the house impenetrable and, just because it was a present, did not proof the cat. All it would have taken was a spell. And now, there was nothing he could do but wait for the Death Eater to appear and try and trick him.

Laughter. Booming, ear-splitting laughter bounced off the walls and surrounded him.

But Harry was ready. He sent a powerful stunner at the source, not daring to use a more dangerous curse in case it hit Teddy. The curse dissipated in the darkness, and from it emerged a tall man with thinning, greying hair. His form displayed hints of long-faded physical prowess and his stained, yellow teeth were bared victoriously. Most importantly of all, Rodolphus Lestrangle's wand was trained at Teddy's temple.

Teddy looked like he was screaming at the top of his voice, but he had been silenced. A wave of dread and insatiable guilt coursed through him. He had failed him. He had failed his godson.

“I always knew,” snarled Lestrangle, “that I would be the one to beat you. I always knew that I, the greatest servant of our Lord, would be the one to avenge him!”

Guilt turned to anger. Harry would work out his weakness, the flaw in his plan, and kill him. Nobody touched his godson and got away from it. But he had to control himself and wait for Lestrangle to make the mistake.

“Well done, Lestrangle,” said Harry, trying to keep him talking. “But how did you do it?”

Harry knew exactly how he had done it, but hoped that, consumed by his own brilliance, Lestrangle would lose concentration just enough for Harry to strike.

“All credit to you, it was difficult. I had to be patient, Potter, and resourceful, I suppose, but mostly patient. Disguised as an old witch, I had tailed your Mudblood for days and finally overheard her plans to buy you a pet for your birthday. I then saw my opportunity and tricked a Ministry buffoon into giving me a list of Animagi in the country. That filthy half-blood –” He nodded towards the dead woman “– was easy enough to find, so I planted her in Magical Menagerie and overpowered one of the staff there.”

“It must have been difficult to maintain simultaneous Imperius Curses,” said Harry, disgusted.

“Ha! I’m not the most wanted wizard in the country for nothing! I waited a week for your Mudblood friend but when she finally came, it did not take much to convince her to buy the Animagus.”

“But why did you wait so long to put your plan in action?”

“It is much more difficult to snare an Unspeakable, Potter. After weeks of effort, I overpowered Croaker and lay in wait for your godson to be left alone with the cat on his weekend visits.”

“Very clever,” said Harry, “worthy of your former master, even. Now what is it you want from me? Money? Your brother’s freedom?”

“Vengeance.”

“I see. So you want a wizard’s duel, in honour of your master?”

“No, Potter. I have not gone through months of toil to see you slip through my fingers.” His dirty face distorted into a cruel grin. “Your godson will see a Lestrangle put you through the veil as you did dear Sirius.” Harry raised his wand a little, thinking he’d be able to get away with a headshot. “Don’t even think about it, Potter. One spell from that wand and darling Teddy is dead.”

Lestrangle had won, and Harry knew it. He had hit Harry where it hurts most.

“And where is the guarantee that you won’t kill him anyway?” spat Harry.

“He has taken nothing from whereas you...you, Potter, ruined everything. Oh, I’ve waited so long for this...too long...”

“A Wizard’s Oath that you will return him to Andromeda Tonks unharmed,” said Harry.

“Ha! I have no further use for the boy.” Harry glowered at him. “I suppose I should fulfil your dying wish. You see how generous we pure-bloods are? I, Rodolphus Lestrangle, hereby swear by my magic that I will return Theodore Lupin to Andromeda Tonks unharmed when Harry Potter walks through the veil.”

He had no choice. He would not risk Teddy’s life to try and salvage his own.

Harry longed to hug Teddy one last time, or at least ruffle his hair. Instead, he had to settle for staring at his fear-stricken face. There were so many things he wanted to tell him, so many things he wanted to teach him, to warn him against.

“Teddy,” said Harry shakily, “remember that your godfather loves you, but never forget your parents. I-I never got to tell you much about

them, but I want you to be strong like your father and as loving as your mother. Take care of grandma, enjoy life and never forget the importance of family.”

Harry could not bear to look at Teddy’s face any longer. A painful lump had risen in his throat and his eyes were stinging. As he stepped on to the dais, he thought of Ron and Hermione, Ginny and Andromeda, and the entire Auror department that he had grown to love. His heart yearned for them, and Harry charged towards the ghostly veil to stop the pain.

He could barely see through the tears. There was laughing. Crying. Whispers all around him. Ancient, scratchy cloth brushing past him. Howling wind. Pain. Fear.

Darkness.

Chapter II: Hollow

Darkness.

Was this death?

Nothing but darkness and distant whispering.

Harry could feel the searing rage rise within him like a bubbling potion. He had been tricked. He felt fifteen years old again. At least then, it was Voldemort. He could not believe it. He had been trapped by the dumb brute that was Rodolphus Lestrage.

He thought of Teddy. He would never be there for him. He had broken the one promise he swore never to break. Teddy was now parentless and without a Godfather. The guilt rose in him like bile. His entire being felt hollow.

He had let Teddy down.

Harry heard it before he saw it.

The whispering grew in crescendo as if it were a distant army charging towards him. Whispering became humming, humming became screams. Screams surrounded him; screams of mirth, screams of anger and screams of anguish. He heard dozens of curses being screamed. He heard walls crashing down, doors being burst through and windows smashing.

He was at Hogwarts.

As his vision cleared, his breath caught in his throat. It wasn't possible... There was no way... But there was the evidence, right before his eyes.

He was reliving the Battle of Hogwarts.

But, and he couldn't explain why, it felt...different. He felt detached from it, almost as though it were a Pensieve memory. A piercing

laugh caught his attention, a laugh he thought he would never hear again.

Duelling furiously, mere metres away from him, were Tonks and Bellatrix. But it was impossible. They were dead. Beside Tonks was Remus, who himself was trading spells with Antonin Dolohov, a man Harry knew to be the most dangerous, loyal Death Eater under Voldemort.

Was this some kind of sick joke?

“Looks like the cub will lose both parents!” shrieked Bellatrix, as she deflected a red curse. She replied with a Cruciatus Curse, which Tonks had to duck out of the way of.

“Shut up, Lestrangle,” hissed Dolohov, who himself was melting the shards of ice Remus had sent at him, “and finish the damn job.”

Harry drew his own wand, and a strange thought struck him. Was the veil somehow offering him the chance to save Remus and Tonks? He thought of Teddy, and how happy he would be with both his parents returned to him.

But as the thought crossed his mind, his vision began to cloud. He rubbed his eyes, trying to bring back his vision. He could feel his glasses, so why could he see nothing?

Then there was a blast so loud his ears began to ring. His vision returned. He was still at Hogwarts, still at the Battle of Hogwarts. He looked around frantically. Was it too late to save Tonks and Remus? The blast, he realised, was a corridor being destroyed. He saw himself, at seventeen, flying through the air, gripping on to his temporary wand for dear life. Hermione had already landed, cushioned by the body of a Death Eater.

Fred was falling head-first towards a bed of jagged, broken bricks. Harry had just enough time to cast a Cushioning Charm, a charm that would save his life. He could save the entire Weasley family immense grief. He could save Ginny from crying at night, once a month, for she had been closer to the twins than anyone. As the words began to

form on his lips, he was suddenly swept off his feet as though he too was sent flying by the blast.

Was this his life flashing before his eyes?

He was flying through a thick mist at such a high speed that the skin on his face was pulled back, unable to keep up. His mouth was open, but he could not breathe. His eyes began to strain – they felt as though they would pop out of their sockets. Then it stopped.

The air was dry and thin – he was high up.

“Draco, do it, or stand aside so one of us-”

Harry blinked as he took in the scene before him. Dumbledore was standing against the ramparts, very white in the face, but calm. Draco had his wand trained on Dumbledore, perhaps even paler than the headmaster. Death Eaters Harry knew all too well surrounded him. Greyback was slumped in the corner of the room. And suddenly, Harry understood. He was being given the chance to save Dumbledore. All he had to do was disarm Severus as he came into the room.

“Severus...”

But if Dumbledore remained alive, what then? After all, he only had weeks to live. What could he achieve in those weeks? Dumbledore had chosen his death day very carefully – it was his death and his intricate plan that had given Harry the chance to beat Voldemort.

As quickly as it had stopped, the ferocious wind picked up again. He thought he could predict where the wind would take him next and, when he landed in the veil room, his fears were confirmed.

Sirius and Bellatrix were duelling, unaware that Dumbledore’s arrival had halted all other fights. Sirius had blocked one of Bellatrix’s curses and was laughing at her.

“Come on, you can do better than that!”

A thought struck Harry. If he, Harry, had not died walking through the veil, perhaps Sirius hadn't either. Or... was this death? After all, he was being forced to relive memories he would rather leave behind.

As Sirius fell through the veil, Harry was propelled away from him, away from the amphitheatre. The wind was less vicious. He could see things rushing past him; objects, people, places. The tri-wizard cup, two hands around it, went by in a glimmer of gold. He thought he heard a voice whisper, "Kill the spare." He saw a small creature, a rat, darting past him, and the wind howled. He caught a glimpse of Riddle, of Hagrid, of himself standing in front of the Mirror of Erised. The words above it imprinted in his mind's eye:

Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi

I show not your face but your heart's desire.

He saw Dudley, Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, the strange men with funny clothes who used to approach him. It all went past faster and faster until everything went black. This is it, thought Harry, I'm dying.

He thought of Ron and Hermione. He would never see them again. He would never see their child. He thought of Neville, Luna, Ginny, Andromeda, all the people he loved more than he could ever say. He would never have a chance to say goodbye. His heart constricted painfully as he thought about Teddy. Sweet, lovable Teddy. He would never see him go to Hogwarts, graduate, get married and have children of his own. Harry would never see the boy he swore to protect with his life grow up without the threat of Voldemort. His only solace was in the fact he died protecting his godson.

Darkness once more.

Had it all been a dream? Why was he still conscious?

The wind picked up again, and this time, Harry knew where it would take him. He braced himself before he was propelled backwards. There was only one other moment Harry had wanted and, somewhere deep within him, still wanted to change. It was the one moment that had changed his life forever. Perhaps this was a

construction, perhaps it wasn't, but Harry knew he did not have the strength to resist the final temptation the veil would throw at him. This, Harry realised, was the memory it was all building up to.

The wind died down.

He was at Godric's Hollow.

He could hear her screaming from the upper floor, trapped, but as long as she was sensible she, at least, had nothing to fear. He climbed the steps, listening with faint amusement to her attempts to barricade herself in. She had no wand upon her either. How stupid they were, and how trusting, thinking that their safety lay in friends, that weapons could be discarded even for moments.

From beyond the closed door came an anguished shriek like nothing he had ever heard. She had finally realised how futile her attempts of keeping him out were.

"Harry? HARRY?"

With the barest flick of his wand, he opened the door and cast aside the chairs and boxes hastily piled against it. The girl's face was streaked with tears and she was frantically searching the room, unaffected by his arrival. How dare she ignore him?

"Lily Potter," he said quietly. She had hidden the boy, thinking it would hoodwink him. Foolish girl. Had she not learnt by now that he was not to be tricked?

The girl turned to face him, her bottom lip quivering, her eyes narrowed. "Leave my house," she said, "now."

She possessed some daring, this girl, to speak to him so. "Where is the boy?"

"He's not here," she said.

"Do not play games with me, girl. Where have you hidden him?"

"He is somewhere you cannot hurt him," she said through gritted teeth.

He could feel his patience wearing thin. Bravery he could tolerate, but stubbornness was a waste of energy. He commanded one of the discarded chairs to make its way to the girl. "Sit," he said.

"No! Leave my house."

"Where are your manners, girl? You have been a most ungracious hostess. If your guest asks you to take a seat, you do so. Now sit." He flicked his wand downwards and she sat immediately. He watched her fruitlessly struggle to get up. She twisted and turned and thrashed and flailed before, finally, her shoulders sagged and silent tears ran down her cheeks. If only she would allow her intellect to rule, she would find herself in a better position than she had ever known.

She stared up at him and said, "I will not betray my son."

He dearly wished he could kill her and be done with it, but there was a chance the secret of the Potter child would die with her, and risks were for the rash. He could see that force would not work here; he would have to use the most successful of weapons, words.

"You need not betray him. You are brave, Lily Evans-"

"Potter," she spat.

"-but bravery must be tempered with caution. Why do you fight for Dumbledore, Lily?"

"I fight for my son's future."

"Forgive me, but you are doing a rather poor job of it." She closed her eyes but the tears continued to trickle down the channels formed in her pale cheeks. "You have stood behind Dumbledore to protect your son but, ultimately, you chose the wrong side. Albus Dumbledore is a selfish old man who cares only for himself – you are merely a tool in

his elaborate schemes. It is because of Dumbledore that your husband is dead.”

The girl’s eyes snapped open and shone with fury, or was it pain? Such emotion, such wasted energy.

“You’re the one who killed him, you filthy snake!”

“Ah, but think, Lily, what caused me to kill him? He, on Dumbledore’s orders, attempted to steal an object of great value to me. On Dumbledore’s orders, he killed Bunnage, Ferlong and Bulstrode, all of whom were important revolutionaries. He almost, as you recall, killed his only cousin-”

“Malfoy deserves to die for what he’s done!”

“Lucius was the reason why, until the Prophecy was uttered, you were safe. How he begged me to spare James...”

“Liar!”

“We are not blood-thirsty murderers, Lily. Family is important to us, and we protect our own. James was killed because he had attempted to kill me on Dumbledore’s orders. Dumbledore killed James. But think: why do you oppose us? What have we ever done to harm you?”

“You’re murderers. You killed Benjy, Marlene and her family, Michael and his family, Doreen, Nicholas...”

“What do these people all have in common? As I have told you, we protect our own. I freely admit that if one of our number is killed, we will retaliate, but we do not attack unprovoked.”

“And what about the countless cold-blooded Muggle killings? Did they do something to your family?”

He moved closer to the girl. Her tears had dried and she seemed to have worked her way into a quiet rage. “There is no evidence that any of my Death Eaters have so much as touched a Muggle – you

are falling for the propaganda supplied by Dumbledore. Tell me Lily, would I not have killed you had I been looking to promote blood supremacy?"

Lily laughed derisively. "What are your goals, then, world peace?"

He summoned a chintz armchair as he had seen Dumbledore do on countless occasions. He glanced at her for a reaction and saw the surprise before she hid it. He took a seat slowly and leaned back, his arms draped on the armrests.

"My dear girl, I have never attempted to hide our goals. We call ourselves the Death Eaters for a reason."

"Oh, is that why you set Inferi on the village of Hogsmeade last week?"

She struggled against his Suppression Charm one last time, but all she achieved was the reddening of her face. When would she learn? When would she believe? The death of her husband was an obstacle. It was an unfortunate but necessary loss of another ancient family – after all, he could not risk another Potter child defeating him.

He stared into her green eyes, which grew and grew until they filled his vision. He found the memories of her parents with absurd ease and, with the barest flick of his wand, projected them into the air just in front of the cot. He added Potter and McKinnon to her parents.

"Imagine, Lily," he whispered, "your husband, parents and dearest friend brought back from the cold, dark abyss that is death. Imagine protecting young Harry from the greatest killer of all. These are our goals, to defeat death himself."

Lily stared at the imitation of her parents, aghast. "Impossible..."

"It is very possible, but Dumbledore is too close-minded to see the truth. He thinks only of his own reputation; after all, who will revere the defeater of Grindelwald if there lives a wizard who has defeated death?"

“Join me, Lily. Join me, and I will offer you and your son protection more complete than you have ever known. Work with my team of experts and we shall find a cure to death together. Forgive me for the death of James – I was blinded by vengeance. We will correct the mistake and bring him back. Think, you will have money, status and a job helping others as you have always wanted. Unlike St Mungo’s, I will not expect you to spend more time at work than home. Give me your hand, Lily. Join me.”

He stood up and extended his left hand. She would surely see sense, and then he would use her to trap Dumbledore. Her allegiance would crush Dumbledore’s failing resistance. He locked her with his gaze once more and searched for the boy’s location. Nothing. As he had expected, Dumbledore had occluded the information, perhaps without her permission. He commanded her current thoughts to show themselves and was mildly disappointed by what he saw. She was too stubborn to see his way of thinking and, for her husband, was planning to spit on his hand.

He withdrew it just as the spit left her mouth.

“So you have chosen to anger me.”

“It was Severus, wasn’t it?” she hissed.

“Where is your son?”

“Did Severus tell you to spare me?”

“I will not repeat myself.”

“Tell me!”

Swiftly, he stood up. “Crucio!”

Her hoarse screams filled the room. The Cruciatus Curse had its benefits – slowly, it would weaken Dumbledore’s occlusions enough for him to tear through. She had squandered his generosity and, as a result, Lily Potter would be dead before the night was through.

Harry stared up at his first home. This was another mission, he told himself, a mission where the stakes were personal. Emotions are the difference between a good Auror and a bad Auror, Head Auror Robards had once told him. The good Auror gets on with the job at hand.

Godric's Hollow was not as Harry had remembered from his trip with Hermione. The gate was not rusty, there was no graphitised sign, the cottage did not seem derelict and, most importantly of all, the top right-hand corner of it was in perfect condition. But he had little time – Voldemort had already torn down the wards.

He resolved to save his parents, in case this was not a dream. He stepped forward, fully expecting the spectral wind to pick up and take him to his death, but it did not come. A wild thought entered his mind: was he in the past?

Harry glanced up at the cottage once more. There was no sign of activity. Was he too late? Would he find himself, little more than one year old, marked and alone? The thought sent a shiver down his spine.

Assess and evaluate.

Other than the distant laughing of local Muggle children and his shoes crunching against the gravel, no sound could be heard. The air was dry and crisp, quite ordinary for an October evening. Harry, wand raised, approached the front door, oak, and examined possible exits and hiding places in case things got rough. After all, he had never consciously faced Voldemort before the Dark Lord had been ripped from his body – thirteen years in hiding may have changed the way he operated.

Suddenly, he heard a new sound – it was distant, tinny and consistent. Silently, Harry cast a Thermosensory Charm. Nothing. There was nobody behind the door. Careful not to make any noise, Harry pushed open the front door.

The entrance hall was small, warm and welcoming. There was a red rug to the left where six pair of shoes were lined up; two pairs each

for his mother, father and himself. The remainder of the floor was made up of dark, weather-beaten wooden panels. Harry cast a Silencing Charm at his shoes.

Why do birds suddenly appear

The sound he had vaguely heard was a young, female's voice singing. Was it his mother? It was coming not from the flight of curved stairs to his left, but from the open door to his right. He vaguely recognised the tune, but could not pin it down.

Every time you are near?

Harry held his wand up at the ready – he was well aware that this could be a trap of some sort. Silently, he edged towards the arched doorway. Along the walls were three photos of a witch and two wizards he did not recognise. Were they his grandparents? The only thing they had in common was that they shared the frame with either his mother or his father. None of the pictures moved.

Harry stopped just out of range of anyone beyond the doorway. He cast another Thermosensory Charm. Nothing.

Just like me, they long to be

Refusing to relax, Harry slipped into the room, feet first. You enter a hostile situation feet first, Robards had once said, we can replace your legs; we can't re-grow your head. Deciding he wasn't being attacked, Harry allowed the rest of his body to follow.

Close to you.

Harry's breath caught in his throat. Lying spread-eagled in the centre of the circular living room, eyes forever frozen with resolve, was his father. He was too late. If his father was dead, then so was his mother. He would find himself in the cot, possibly crying. He felt that crushing emotion he was now accustomed to: defeat. His eyes wandered to the source of the music; an old, rusting radio.

Then a woman began to scream.

Harry turned towards the noise. It sounded as though it was coming from upstairs. His heart pounded so hard in his chest it almost drowned out the screaming. Was she alive? Could it be? But how? Harry had relived the memory of his mother dying enough times; Voldemort did not torture her, he had killed her. The screams he was hearing were those of a person suffering under the Cruciatus, it was the type of scream he had been trained to recognise.

Snapping into action, Harry sprinted out of the room and bounded up the stairs two at a time. He would not be late – not this time.

The door opposite the landing was wide open. Beyond, he found the tall, thin form of Voldemort, his back turned, and his mother, sat in a chair, nothing but anguish across her young face. Harry raised his wand and aimed very carefully at Voldemort, who had not felt him coming. Despite her pain, his mother stared straight at him, her radiant green eyes wide as Galleons. This was it. He would rip Voldemort from his body as he did all those years ago. But this time, he knew what he was doing.

“Avada Kedavra!”

A brilliant jet of green light erupted from Harry’s wand and soared straight through the point Voldemort had been a second before and smashed through the far window, causing shards of glass to cover the cot.

Then Voldemort turned around and Harry’s breath caught in his throat. The Dark Lord appeared...human. There were no red eyes, slits for a nose or scaly, waxy skin. Instead, he looked like a middle-aged Tom Riddle. He had shoulder-length, jet-black hair, pale skin and gaunt features that hinted at long faded good looks. But the biggest surprise was his eyes; they were cold, dark, malicious, yet captivating. They were inviting, intuitive and dangerous.

Harry’s suspicions were wrong – this was not the past, it was a delusion.

The falling glass stopped quite suddenly and he snapped out of his trance, quite certain of what Voldemort was attempting. Every single shard, including the one that had dug into the side of Lily's face, raced towards him, but Harry was ready, spurred on by the thought that he could not be harmed. After all, this was a dream. He moved his wand in an anti-clockwise semi-circle and watched as the glass melted against his newly constructed sheet of blue flame.

Harry dove to his right and watched Voldemort's Killing Curse rush past him, the speed and power of it causing the hairs on his arm to stand on end. He needed a way to reach Lily and get her out.

"Potter?"

Voldemort considered him for the first time during the duel and Harry caught something he had only seen on the Dark Lord's face once before – disbelief. But on the face of this...construct...it did not look out of place. Then it hit him; Voldemort thought he was James. He had to use Voldemort's surprise against him – the Dark Lord would be slightly sloppier than usual.

"Surprised?" said Harry.

"The Killing Curse cannot be undone. This is impossible."

"You have messed with ancient magic and are now reaping what you have sown."

Voldemort snarled and summoned an ashen spear of fire. Recognising it as the Spear of Mars, Harry sent a jet of water at it before freezing it, encasing the Spear in doing so. Without drawing breath, Harry jabbed his wand at the ground at Voldemort's feet before throwing Bludgeoning Hex at him. As he had expected, Voldemort absorbed the spell.

Harry kept sending curse after curse at the Dark Lord, who absorbed them all with absurd ease. It seemed he was waiting for Harry to tire, confirmed by the faint smile playing at his lips. "I had granted you a swift death; I will not be so generous this time."

At that exact moment, Harry activated the cage Voldemort had unwittingly been empowering. The cage's bars glowed with bright light. It was the cage he had used to capture Antonin Dolohov. The cage had defeated Dolohov, but he expected Voldemort to escape it in seconds...luckily, seconds was all he would need.

By the time Harry reached Lily, Voldemort had escaped. The last thing Harry saw before he Apparated Lily out to the one place he knew would be safe was the final Killing Curse to be cast that night.

"Face it, Albus, Black has betrayed us!"

Dumbledore sat behind his desk, his chin resting on a bridge formed by his fingers. His old friend, Alastor Moody, was pacing up and down the office furiously.

"We must not crumble to unsubstantiated rumours, Alastor. I am inclined to belief that Sirius would give his own life rather than betray the location of James and Lily."

"Rumours?" spat Alastor. "We're talking evidence here! You must move the Potters."

"To move the Potters would be to assure Voldemort victory. Sirius has never been one to linger in one location overly long; I am sure we shall find him in due course. Patience, Alastor."

"He's followed his dear family, I know it. Why else would he just disappear off the face of the earth? And right after he was reported to be acting strangely, too. I have three Aurors hunting him down as we speak and none have got wind of him. Seems like an awfully convenient disappearance, eh?"

"While the thought of James bestowing his secret with me would have made this old man sleep easier, I could not have hoped for a better man to keep the Potters safe. We must not allow Voldemort to divide us, for this is his strength."

“There are spies all around us, Albus.” Alastor’s magical eye scanned the room, as it usually did when the Auror was riled. “The Order is no longer safe.”

“We shall see. Now, I must check up on Frank and Alice. Go to Godric’s Hollow – if Sirius is not there within the hour, we will know where his loyalties lie.”

Alastor reluctantly nodded and hobbled out of the office, muttering under his breath as he did so.

“Dumbledore!”

Dumbledore flicked his gaze towards the wall of portraits and almost instantly pin-pointed the owner of the voice. In Dippet’s empty frame was a tall, thin, imperious man whose likeness to James was uncanny. His usually groomed hair was dishevelled and he looked as though he had run a marathon.

“News, Charlus?”

“The...worst.”

Dumbledore’s blood ran cold. “Is there any hope of saving them?”

“James...dead. Lily is being...tortured. Harry is gone.”

Gone? Surely not...

“Fawkes!”

His beloved phoenix swooped down and they both disappeared in a flash of red flame.

Almost as soon as Harry’s feet landed on the top floor of the Shrieking Shack, his arm became the victim of a pincer-like grip. Lily was staring at him with a wild look in her eye. Most of her face was veiled by her now unruly red hair; her face was soaked with sweat and blood from the cut above her cheek.

“Where is Harry?” she snarled.

Harry hungrily took in everything he could about her. He understood why people were so surprised by his eyes – they were exactly the same as hers, the same almond-shape and the same hue of green. But he was being selfish. She had just lost her husband and son, she was distressed. Harry pulled himself together.

“I’m afraid I don’t know.”

“Voldemort...he must have...no, I refuse to believe it! WHERE IS HE?”

Harry reluctantly cast a Calming Charm at his mother. She would surely hurt herself if she carried on as she was, especially if she decided to Apparate back into Godric’s Hollow. He waited for the effects of the spell to kick in. The spell was unadvisable because of its parasitic nature – it burned energy at a far faster rate than usual and could be addictive. However, without a Calming Draught at hand, Harry had no other choice.

Harry thought back on what had happened. His father, James, dead, his mother alive, Voldemort no longer looking like a snake-like monster. What was going on? Where was he? His thoughts were interrupted by Lily.

“I just want to find my son,” she sighed. She slipped down the wooden pole she was leaning on and put her head in her hands.

Harry tore his eyes from his mother and made sure the area was secure. As he had predicted, the Shack seemed empty enough. Broken furniture cluttered the floor, dried blood stained the walls and torn fur carpeted the floor. The wind outside howled and, with nothing but broken windows to protect it, the Shack felt its full force. It was far from perfect, but it would do for now. Harry tightened the grip on his wand as a rat scuttled into a gaping hole in the floorboards. He went over to the window and scanned the village. The street was deserted, an extraordinary sight on a Saturday night. But then again, from what he could piece together, Voldemort was at the height of his power.

Harry returned to his mother and crouched beside her. He was astonished at how young she was; it had never occurred to him before, but she was at least three years younger than him, barely out of Hogwarts by the looks of it. How had she, a Muggle-born, managed to find herself at the heart of the war in such a short space of time?

“There are some things I have to tell you, Mu- Lily.”

Her hands slid down her face, and he noticed how red and swollen her eyes were. She looked at him searchingly, as if for the first time. “Who are you?”

Harry sighed; he could not lie to her. “I’m Harry, Harry Potter.” The colour drained from her face. She looked around frantically and Harry understood perfectly. “I’m not a Death Eater, this isn’t a trap. I was forced through the veil at the Department of Mysteries and, somehow, I’m here...wherever this is.”

“Stay away from me, Death Eater!” Harry could feel her straining against the Calming Charm. He had to placate her instantly or the results would be catastrophic.

“Would a Wizard’s Oath convince you?”

“An Oath?”

“I, Harry Potter, swear by my magic that I will tell you, Lily Potter, nothing but the truth for a total of one hour.” Something warm bubbled inside of him after uttering the last syllable, a feeling that only stopped when his mother spoke.

“What’s your real name?”

“Harry Potter.”

His mother fixed her eyes on him disbelievingly. “W-Who are your parents?”

“James and Lily Potter.”

“This can’t be... Y-You’re older than I am...”

“I’ve been sent to the past, I think; or rather, I’m from the future. I don’t know what’s going on myself, to be honest. It’s all so different...”

Lily clutched her forehead and said, “Long-term time travel is not possible...”

“That’s what we were taught.”

Suddenly, her eyes lit up and she tightened her fists in excitement. “This must mean you survived! W-where were you found?” Harry shot her a sympathetic look. “Please...Harry...I have to know where he is...”

“I changed the timeline,” said Harry quietly.

“What?”

“You were meant to die tonight.” Lily’s face was marred with horror and confusion. “Where I’m from, Wormtail betrayed your location. Voldemort came to Godric’s Hollow and killed dad first. Then he went upstairs and found you and me. He told you to stand aside, he only needed to kill me, but you refused. You begged him to spare me until, finally, he killed you. He turned his wand on me, but your sacrifice protected me – the AK, Killing Curse that is, backfired.” Lily simply stared. “I wasn’t meant to be here tonight – I wasn’t meant to step in. I don’t know how I managed to get here...”

Lily’s eyes glistened with tears and her hand went to her mouth. “So he’s dead?” she choked.

Harry didn’t need to ask again – he knew she was talking about his father this time. He nodded solemnly.

“Oh, James...”

For what he suspected was an hour, Harry comforted her as best he could – he had never been good with crying women. He placed a

hand on her thigh and squeezed gently. He whispered comforting words to her and listened patiently as she went through the three stages of grief Andromeda had taught him: denial, anger and acceptance. She had demanded to return to Godric's Hollow, certain she would find his father there, alive; she had ranted against Wormtail using expletives even he hadn't encountered and, finally, she stared into the distance, refusing to utter a word...

Until, "You're really Harry?"

Harry, who had been thinking about what he would do next, started at the sudden address. "Yes."

"It must have been a miracle." Her voice was hollow and distant; she was beyond grief. Her eyes were downcast, her skin deathly pale.

"Sorry?"

Her eyes flicked up and met his. "Don't you see? Somehow, your magic reacted to Voldemort's attack and aged you by two decades at least. How else did you get through the Fidelius?"

Harry shot his mother a pitying look. There was such conviction behind her words that he could not bring himself to contradict her. If it made her feel better, she could believe he was an angel sent from heaven for all he cared. As long as it kept her away from that dark feeling of isolation he knew all too well, he'd be happy. He stood up, intending to do another sweep of the Shack.

It happened before he could react.

Dumbledore, slightly younger than Harry remembered him, emerged from a plume of red flame and disarmed him. He had that same look of cold fury Harry had seen only twice before. He moved Lily as far away from Harry as physically possibly and bore down on him.

Harry stood his ground but avoided Dumbledore's searching gaze. After all, there was little proof this was the real Albus Dumbledore.

“Who are you?” said Dumbledore, with ferocious force behind his words.

From the corner of his eye, Harry saw Lily try and pass through what he was sure was an invisible barrier. “My name is Harry Potter,” said Harry quietly.

“You must have misheard,” said Dumbledore, “what is your real name?” Harry could almost sense the power radiating from the headmaster; it was a feeling he had not encountered in any other wizard after the death of Voldemort.

“Harry Potter. But why take my word for it? See for yourself.” Harry finally looked up and met Dumbledore’s electric-blue eyes. Looking into those eyes made him feel sixteen again; it was a feeling he wasn’t entirely comfortable with.

“How extraordinary... Nebuchadnezzar’s Archway...”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief – Dumbledore knew that the veil existed! Surely he would be able to pull Ministry strings and send Harry back. After all, whenever his baby self was found, it would be much happier than Harry had been with the Dursleys, even with the crushing blow of losing his father. It was so tempting to take his mother back with him, but he knew that the repercussions of doing so were dire. Yes, he would ask Dumbledore to escort him to the Department of Mysteries and they’ll forget all about Halloween – it would be like a bad dream. And LeStrange...he would wish he hadn’t survived the battle of Hogwarts.

“I would appreciate it if you did me a favour, Professor,” said Harry, making quite sure his mother could not hear. “I need you to pull a few strings so I can go back.”

Dumbledore lowered his half-moon glasses and tilted his head slightly. “Go back? The Lost Archway is exactly that; it has never been recovered.”

Chapter III: Lost

"Lost? No, it's been found by the Department of Mysteries."

Harry could feel excitement and dread building inside him. There was surely a chance to go back; he was not dead. The thought of seeing his loved ones again sent a wave of joy through him like hot Chocolate on a cold winter's night.

"Regretfully, I must contradict you. I am well aware of the inner workings of the Department of Mysteries and can assure you that the Lost Archway has never been recovered."

Harry opened his mouth to counter Dumbledore when, from the corner of his eye, he saw Lily fall. By the time the words to the Cushioning Charm formed on his lips, she already lay on a floating stretcher.

"She needs to see Madam Pomfrey," said Harry, "I had to subdue her with a Calming Charm."

Dumbledore frowned slightly. "Quite understandable. I daresay this conversation would be best confined within the welcoming walls of Hogwarts, in any case - it is unwise to linger in insecure locations in these troubled times."

Dumbledore led the procession down the creaking stairs of the Shack; Lily floated behind him and Harry took the rear, a formation he was comfortable with. However, when Dumbledore headed for the front door, Harry said, "Where are you going?"

Dumbledore cocked his head, his expression suggesting pleasant surprise, as though Harry had offered him a sherbet lemon. "To the school; were you hoping for a detour?"

"No, I was hoping I wouldn't be patronised. I know about the tunnel from the Shack to the school."

Dumbledore smiled as if Harry had solved a particularly taxing riddle. "I apologise for any offence - I was merely attempting to protect the secrets of the school. After all, caution is the father of security."

Neither spoke as they traipsed through the tunnel, the magically frozen leaves of the Whomping Willow, the Hogwarts grounds and, finally, the deserted Entrance Hall. Dumbledore stopped, quite suddenly, in the centre of the hall. He gave a sharp, high whistle and a house-elf appeared.

"Headmaster Dumblydore, sir!" squeaked the House-elf, bowing so low its nose brushed the polished, flagstone floor.

"Good evening, Cruncher," said Dumbledore. "Would you be kind enough to transport dear Lily to the Hospital Wing?"

"Cruncher is happy to, Headmaster Dumblydore, sir!" The House-elf bowed once more and disappeared with Lily.

"Are you sure that's good for her?" said Harry.

"Quite; House-elf Apparition possesses a level of subtlety and comfort we humans can only dream of. Rest assured, Lily is quite safe. Come, Mr Potter."

They ascended the white, marble staircase, neither of them making a noise. The torches on either wall came alive as they approached, only to be extinguished when they passed. The first floor was equally empty; there was a faint, dimming light far in the distance which Harry assumed was a Prefect. They climbed the next set of stairs in silence.

"Albus, old boy, what a pleasant surprise!"

Harry did not need the light from the torches that had illuminated the second floor landing to know that the booming voice belonged to Horace Slughorn. In his own time, Harry had reluctantly attended Horace's dinner parties once a year since the battle of Hogwarts. He endured being paraded around the Slug Club like a prize horse – Slughorn made sure to introduce Harry to each of his favourites that

year. In return, Slughorn became the Auror department's Potions expert. After all, with the death of Severus, Slughorn was widely regarded as the leading British expert in Potioneering – he was invaluable in cases involving potions beyond Auror training.

“A pleasure as always, my dear Horace.”

Harry considered hanging back and waiting for Slughorn to leave. Then, when he craned his neck, he saw that the old Potions Professor's enormous bulk was positioned in a way that suggesting he was going to come down the stairs. It would be better to appear naturally and let Dumbledore come up with an excuse – after all, Harry would probably never see this Slughorn ever again. Why should he care if he was seen?

“Oho!” cried Slughorn when Harry climbed the final few steps. He looked much the same as he did in Harry's time, except his great walrus-like moustache was streaked with gold and there were grey wisps of head hair dancing around a shiny bald patch. “James, m'boy, what brings you to Hogwarts?”

Harry opened his mouth to contradict him, when Dumbledore cut in. “James and I have some urgent matters to discuss. I felt, for his safety, the conversation was best conducted in my office.”

“A fine plan! How has Lily been faring recently?”

“Fine,” said Harry, forcing a smile. He did not meet Slughorn's eyes – the dim light was hiding his eye colour but direct eye contact would blow his cover.

Slughorn's toothy grin became a concerned frown. “Are you alright there, James, you don't seem yourself.”

“It's been a difficult few weeks,” said Harry, deciding not to refer to Slughorn by name. For all he knew, James had a special nickname for the Potions Master and using his real name would only cause suspicion.

“That’s quite understandable, m’boy.” Slughorn pat Harry’s shoulder sympathetically. “Well, I won’t keep you gentlemen any longer. Good night to you both!”

“Let us hope it is,” said Dumbledore.

The distant echo of Slughorn’s footsteps stayed with them as they walked briskly to the Gargoyle at the end of the empty corridor. Dumbledore muttered the password – “Humbugs” – and they waited for the moving staircase to take them to the office.

Even in the dim light, Dumbledore’s office appeared exactly as Harry remembered. Every last detail, from the wall of portraits to Fawkes’ cage was the same. Harry noticed the expensive silver instruments on the spindle-legged table and could not help but smile sadly. What he had not known the day he destroyed them was that the total cost of damages he had incurred neared two thousand Galleons, yet Dumbledore did not bat an eyelid. It would be a formidable task convincing the old headmaster to help him leave, but Harry had the edge – surprise.

Dumbledore took his usual seat behind his desk and Harry took his, beside the spindle-legged table. Dumbledore smiled at him, waiting for Harry to speak and Harry reciprocated. They sat smiling at each other for what seemed an age. Well aware that Dumbledore was reading his thoughts, Harry recalled highlights of his life until fifth year. While he had never managed to master Occlumency, he had learnt, courtesy of Robards himself, the fundamentals of showing a Legilimens what he wants to see. Considering how few Legilimens were left following the deaths of Dumbledore, Severus and Voldemort, the fundamentals were all he needed.

When Harry felt some of his sixth year memories coming to the forefront of his mind, he said, “We came here to talk, not to have my mind raided.”

“I apologise,” said Dumbledore, unabashed. “Would you like something to drink, tea, perhaps?”

“No, thank you. No confectionary either, please.”

Dumbledore quirked an eyebrow but otherwise remained calm as ever. “Are you quite sure I cannot tempt you with a mint humbug? They are quite delightful, though I must admit the aftertaste leaves much to be desired.”

“I don’t need to be put at ease,” said Harry. He enjoyed watching Dumbledore hide his surprise – it was so quick, Harry almost missed the slight pupil dilation. He thought about all the times in the past six years he had wished for Dumbledore’s convoluted advice and now, when he finally had that impossible chance, he wanted nothing more than to be speaking to somebody straight-talking and easily read – somebody like Ron.

“I would appreciate being told the events leading to our meeting in the Shrieking Shack.”

“I’ll tell you,” said Harry, “if you promise not to lie throughout our chat.”

“I would like to think my other-worldly counterpart refrained from lying unless provoked.”

“So would I, but we both know that’s far from the truth. Now, I’m asking whether or not you can give me an Oath that you won’t lie to me. By all means evade certain truths, we’ll both be doing a bit of that, but I’d like to think all that is said will be hard truths.”

“I admit I am surprised by your distrust...”

“Caution may be the father, Professor, but distrust is the mother of security.”

Dumbledore chuckled and, to Harry’s surprise, gave the Oath. He did, however, ask Harry to reciprocate, to which Harry grudgingly complied. He was, however, reasonably pleased that there wouldn’t be any white lies on the table. With that thought, he launched into the

tale of how he came to the past, starting with Teddy's kidnap and ending with Dumbledore disarming him.

"So here's what I'm saying," said Harry, throat a little parched, "I want to go back, obviously. I've got very dear friends as well as a godson who I love like he was my own. I can't stay here. I tried to help baby Harry and messed up royally-

"I daresay saving Lily is far from a failure."

"I didn't save my father, which means mission incomplete, which means failure. But I suppose baby Harry's better off than he would've been with the Dursleys – good job hiding him, by the way – and so I've appeased my conscience. While I'd love to get to know my mother, I can't abandon my friends and godson to do that. So, if you'd be so kind, I want to go back through the veil."

Dumbledore leaned back and examined him closely, a crease appearing in his forehead. "Harry – may I call you Harry?" Harry nodded. "There are some factors you have not considered. Firstly, you assume I was lying about the Lost Archway – I assure you I was not. This piece of information leads to another; you are not, as you believe, in the past. All the evidence suggests you are, from your perspective, in an alternate reality."

Harry's eyes narrowed. Alternate reality? "What is the evidence?"

"What few ancient writings we have recovered suggest that King Nebuchadnezzar's Archway was not a portal through time; this we can corroborate. After all, would his appearances in various time periods not have been documented? No, the writings imply that the Archway is a link between parallel dimensions that independently exist side by side. Moving away from the murky waters of ancient data, your existence here, scar and all, is evidence enough. Had you indeed come to the past and saved Lily, you would have not only saved yourself from that curse scar, but you would not have been the one Voldemort chose. It therefore follows that Rodolphus LeStrange would have no motivation behind his assassination attempt. As a result, you would not have walked through the Archway. In other

words, the changes you have made to the natural timeline have had no effect on you whatsoever.”

“Then there’s the fact that we actually managed to find the veil in our world,” said Harry, frowning. “Oh, and Voldemort himself. In my...dimension, did you say?” Dumbledore nodded. “Voldemort looks more like a snake than a person.”

“Yes, undoubtedly you find subtle differences between your world and ours. The most concrete proof we have, however, is the disappearance of baby Harry, for I did not enact any further defensive measures. It is my belief that when the Fidelius was broken and you arrived at Godric’s Hollow, your souls collided – there could not be two Harry Potters in existence. Your soul, far stronger and more experienced, triumphed and his soul merged with yours. It is my belief that, sadly, young Harry is forever lost.”

Harry sighed and leaned back on his chair. “She thinks I’m her Harry.”

“A viable conclusion, without the evidence.”

“A different dimension...” Harry removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. It seemed an age since he had last slept. “Professor, I’m going to find the veil.”

“So elusive is the Lost Archway that many believe it is mythical. After decades of arduous work, the Ministry have yet to locate it. I tell you this not to crush hope, but to make you quite aware of the difficult road you have chosen.”

“What are you hiding?” said Harry sharply.

Dumbledore opened his mouth but closed it almost immediately. He had almost lied. “I must say, I have never met such a perceptive young man...”

“Don’t dodge the question.”

“I have a proposition for you, one I hope you find agreeable.” Harry could not miss the worry on the old man’s face as he rose from his seat and went to the open window. “We are losing this war, Harry. We have, in the past few weeks alone, lost Benjy Fenwick, Marlene McKinnon, James Potter and now young Harry. How many other Peter Pettigrews have infiltrated the Order? Who will die next week? I confide in you this which I have told no other because you have defeated Voldemort.”

“How do you-”

“Never can live while the other survives. Voldemort was never patient – he would have forced the fulfilment of the Prophecy one way or the other.”

“Yes, with enormous help from you and my friends, I defeated Voldemort. I can see where this is going, Professor, but I’m sorry, I can’t...not again.”

“I do not ask you to defeat him, only to help us...to help me. Every fatality adds another burden to this old heart and I fear it cannot cope with any more loss. I believe now that the Prophecy, the one weapon we possessed, has turned against us – it has been fulfilled in Voldemort’s favour –”

“It’s equally, if not more, likely that Neville will now be the Prophecy child. Look, how about this; I’ll tell you how to win the war and in return, you help me get back.”

“Allow me to show you some brief memories of mine,” said Dumbledore, retrieving his Pensieve from its cabinet and placing it on his surprisingly tidy desk. He disturbed the surface with his wand and a tall, broad-shouldered man floated out from its silvery depths. “This is Edgar Bones, a member of the Minister’s Council and a very close friend of mine.”

“Albus,” barked Bones, his booming voice laced with aristocracy, “the Iraqi Minister of Culture has been in touch with us; it’s as we feared. There have been reported sightings of a man fitting You-

Know-Who's description near the site where the Hanging Gardens of Babylon is said to rest. He's looking for the Archway."

Dumbledore tapped the surface and Bones descending back into the Pensieve, only to be replaced by a short, stooped, ancient man. "This is Marlon McMahon," he muttered, "the wizarding world's leading expert on the seven ancient wonders of the world."

"Crooked thieves the lot of them!" wheezed McMahon. "All my life's work, gone! Had it not been for my son, they would have killed me, I suspect. Oh, Albus, you must retrieve those scrolls; I shudder to think of the damage they can cause if misused."

Dumbledore tapped the Pensieve once more and McMahon disappeared into its depths. "You have undoubtedly come to the conclusion that our paths are intertwined. Lord Voldemort has the scrolls that lead to the Lost Archway and he will be guarding them jealously. If we assist one another, I am quite sure you agree we will both benefit."

"Ok, how about this for a deal: I take down his six Horcruxes but you find and off him yourself. Once that's done, you've gotten rid of him, I get to go home and we're all happy."

Dumbledore furrowed his brow. "Horcruxes? Please elucidate, Harry."

It was Harry's turn to frown; surely if Slughorn knew of Horcruxes when Voldemort was in school, so did Dumbledore. "Horcruxes are items that store pieces of the soul. Voldemort has used them to guard against death."

"It appears we have encountered yet another subtle difference between our worlds. I am quite sure that such a vulgar form of magic does not exist considering how stringently Voldemort has been searching for methods of prolonging his life. Carelessness is inadvisable, however, and I will contact a good friend of mine to confirm my beliefs."

It was Harry's turn to frown. Horcruxes not existing would explain why Voldemort looked normal – it was probably the Horcruxes that had robbed him of his human appearance. "If he doesn't even have Horcruxes, what's the problem? You're the most powerful living wizard, by my reckoning."

"You are too kind, Harry. Unfortunately, I have had very few chances to bring Voldemort to justice; he has proven to be quite elusive. If we were to locate him, we would find the scrolls and stand a reasonable chance of defeating him."

It was Harry's turn to stand up. "I have to think about this."

"Quite understandable."

"I assume you want me to keep up this persona as da- James."

"If you would be so kind. I have one last request I hope you accept. It would be beneficial for your safety and the successful maintenance of your persona as James if you remained in the castle until you reach a decision."

Harry paused, considered, and then decided on a non-committal, "I'll see what I can do. Goodnight, Professor."

"Goodnight, Harry."

Three days had passed. Harry had kept his word and had not left the castle since his talk with Dumbledore. He had spent the hours alone contemplating his next move. Clearly, there were fundamental differences between this world and his, differences that he had to learn of sooner or later if he were to successfully return.

Harry glanced at his watch for what seemed like the hundredth time – half-past ten. He paced up and down the room he had been given, annoyed at the slow passage of time. The dark red curtains had been parted, allowing the early morning November sunlight to filter through the arched windows and illuminate Harry's generous quarters. He had been given a comfortable four-poster bed that had reminded him

of his time at Hogwarts, a reasonably sized table and enough carpet space for him to pace comfortably. At his request, his food arrived in his room, three times a day and, like the food, back editions of the Daily Prophet were supplied. The ones he had been sent today lay across his table:

Mounting Pressure On Bagnold After Famous Aurors' Disappearances

By special reporter Rita Skeeter

Frank and Alice Longbottom were confirmed as the latest Aurors missing yesterday evening by Head of the Magical Law Enforcement, Bartemius Crouch.

The announcement came as pressure has been mounting on pacifist Minister for Magic Millicent Bagnold to step down. A source close to the Minister told your reporter, "Bagnold is definitely losing her grip on power. She has failed to quell the rise of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and refuses to acknowledge that emergency measures must be enforced if we are to stand any chance against Him."

Meanwhile, Mr Crouch has been hailed for his no-nonsense approach to captured Death Eaters. Measures such as widening Auror powers and throwing Death Eaters in Azkaban without cumbersome, time-consuming trials have levelled the playing field, with more Death Eaters being caught than ever before.

But with the continual depletion of his forces and lack of support from Brainless Bagnold, can Mr Crouch hold out for much...

The rest of the article was covered by another one.

Dumbledore Calls For More Protection For Muggle-borns

The article itself was covered by another clipping.

Head Healer Warns: St Mungo's On The Brink of Closure

There are so few spare beds left at St Mungo's, the hospital has been forced to turn away any patient whose affliction is not classified as 'severe', Head Healer Gormond warned today.

“Our Healers are beyond stretching point and, with increasing patient numbers and Healers emigrating, the hospital is in real danger. If the Minister does not act quickly to invest money in the protection of our employees and opening of new wings, I fear we will no longer be able to operate. Our need is dire...

The remainder of the column had been covered by one last article.

Economy In “Worst Crisis For Five Hundred Years”

Economists working for Gringott's have warned that the British wizarding economy will collapse without immediate financial restructuring by the Ministry.

“Our previously flourishing trade links with America, India and Hungary have waned in recent months amidst fears that our top businesses are being run by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named,” said Morris Jackson, Gringott's Head Economist.

“Many of our strongest economic allies are boycotting our goods and as a result, 20 of businesses have been forced to close, 8 of which is thought to be from direct Death Eater intervention. A further 35 are predicted to be paying blood money to Death Eaters, and 15 are only floating due to dwindling Ministry subsidies. We have a real crisis on our hands and without drastic action, the brain drain will intensify and the economy will stagnate. This is our worst crisis for five hundred years...

Harry had not been surprised by what he had read. Voldemort, as he expected, kept a low profile and had begun his ascent to power with a string of high-profile disappearances, both of information and Ministry personnel. There were combinations of co-ordinated attacks on Muggle-borns as well as isolated assassinations on outspoken anti-pure-blood activists such as Morris Jackson. The uncertainty of the public had been cleverly manipulated and any criminal activity was

mindlessly blamed on the Death Eaters, with or without substantial evidence. What had angered Harry, however, was the reaction of the Bagnold. Far from reassuring the public, the flustered Minister had introduced flawed decrees such as forbidding the public from speaking Voldemort's name for their own "self-preservation".

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Harry stopped pacing and looked to the window. It was a Daily Prophet owl, which he hastily allowed in and paid, in return for that morning's edition. Clutching the newspaper, still warm from the press, Harry sat at his desk, pushing away his empty cereal bowl and old newspaper clippings to make room for it. He unrolled the paper and glanced at the headline.

Barmy Bagnold Resigns, Crouch New Minister

By Special Correspondent Rita Skeeter

Minister Millicent Bagnold resigned from office last night amid fears that her five year-old son was in danger, your reporter can exclusively reveal. Her resignation comes after a Wizengamot official yesterday confessed his concerns over her mishandling of the war against the Dark Lord.

The Daily Prophet can also exclusively reveal that the Wizengamot has unanimously elected Bartemius Crouch, former no-nonsense Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, as the new Minister for Magic. Through his visionary leadership, the Auror Department has brought to justice more Death Eaters than it has ever known.

A source close to the new Minister said, "Minister Bagnold was an adequate politician in her own right, but never a war-time leader. Mr Crouch will prove far more proactive and will bring the peace we crave."

Minister Crouch, who is believed to be drawing up defence measures with his team of experts, was unavailable for comment.

More on what we can expect from Minister Crouch on pages 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7.

Harry frowned at the black-and-white photo of a plump, greying witch, captioned as Bagnold, doing her best to move out of frame. He skimmed through the ensuing pages dubiously – unless he was very much mistaken, Crouch had brokered some kind of deal with the Prophet. Every article was full of praise for the new Minister and scorn for Bagnold who, they implied, was hustled out of office.

Harry was reading about some of Crouch's most significant captures when there was a soft knock on the door. He went to the door and instinctively wrapped his left hand around his wand. The room was, by his request, on the sixth floor, in a part of the castle Harry knew was never used. He was only ever visited briefly by Dumbledore once a day, always in the evening. So who was this?

Harry slowly opened the door, positioning his body so that his left shoulder was facing the door – that way, he was minimising the area of his body susceptible to attack and improving his chances of dodging offensive spells. It was all in vain, however; it was Lily. She looked far better than she did on Halloween – her skin had retained its natural pinkish glow, her eyes were unblemished and her hair had been neatly tied in a ponytail. She smiled, but the melancholy in her eyes contradicted it.

“May I come in?” she said, her voice soft.

“Of course,” said Harry. He considered conjuring a chair but, remembering that Voldemort had done the very same thing, offered her a seat on his bed, while he pulled up his desk chair.

Harry had not seen her since Halloween. He understood what she was going through and knew that, in her place, he would have liked to be left alone to grieve. After all, those two weeks alone at the Dursleys after Sirius' death, all those years ago, did him a world of good. Even if he suspected Dumbledore had not, he wanted to give her space and instead sent a note along with a house-elf telling her

she was more than welcome to come and see him when she was ready.

“Would you like something to drink?” said Harry. “Tea, coffee, Butterbeer?”

“A Butterbeer would be wonderful, thanks.” She sat with her fingers fidgeting nervously over her lap.

Harry relayed her preference to his empty cereal bowl, which almost instantly disappeared, replaced by two pint-glasses of Butterbeer. He gave one to Lily and raised his silently before drinking a quarter of it in one go. She only drank a sip, then cupped it in her hands.

“Are you feeling better?” he said, breaking the awkward silence.

“Much better, thanks.” She took another sip of Butterbeer. “Your eyes...”

“Dumbledore asked if I could turn them brown, so that, you know...”

“Yes, I know,” she said sharply. “I came here to thank you for saving me, and for stopping me from doing anything reckless.”

“You’re welcome, but I regret not getting in time to save –”

“I’d also like to thank you for giving me some space these past few days,” she interrupted, and Harry noticed her hand had tightened around her glass.

Harry leaned forward involuntarily. “I know how it feels.”

Harry could see her struggling not to cry. “To lose a husband?”

“No, to have everyone you’ve ever loved taken away from you one by one. To feel completely alone, to have all hope, warmth and happiness sucked from you so that all you’re left with is the numb realisation that you’ll never see that smile you loved, or hear that laugh that lifted your spirits when you were down.”

She looked up at him, her eyes shining with tears. "He ruined your life, too?"

"Yeah, for a while."

"For a while?"

"I killed him in my seventh year."

Lily's eyes widened with horror and disbelief. "You killed Voldemort while you were at school?"

"I had a lot of help from Dumbledore and my friends; it's not like when Dumbledore beat Grindelwald."

Lily leaned forward, hope creeping into her face. Her breaths were fast and heavy. "Surely if you've done it once-

"There are some major differences between my world and this one; it's not a simple case of retracing my steps."

"Oh," she said.

She seemed so crushed, so defeated, that Harry said, "But I'm going to give the Order all the help I can."

Another awkward silence descended between them, and Lily stared over his shoulder, her eyes hollow and distant. She had come to him to remind herself of James, the way she had hungrily studied his face when she entered told him that much, but Harry was not sure how to broach the subject, or whether to do it at all.

Harry met Lily's gaze and could see in her eyes that she desperately wished he was James or her baby. It was disconcerting, but he did not break eye contact, she needed this to recover.

"Have you ever felt you made one great mistake, one that ruined your entire life?"

“Yes,” said Harry, “many, but in the end they worked themselves out, I suppose. Why?”

Lily looked down at her glass. “No, forget it, sorry, I’m being silly. I keep mistaking...I mean, you were raised magically so it’d be nonsense, anyway...”

“I wasn’t raised magically.”

Lily, in mid-sip, snorted out her drink and her laughs became a coughing fit. “Please don’t humour me, how could you not have been raised magically? I mean, there’s Sirius for one...”

“In Azkaban,” said Harry, “for murdering thirteen Muggles, set up by none other than Peter Pettigrew.”

Lily’s mouth formed a small ‘o’. “Remus?”

“A werewolf.”

“Of course, Umbridge and that horrid decree. Frank and Alice?”

Harry sighed. “Dear Bellatrix and her gang tortured them to insanity shortly after Halloween.”

Horror-struck, Lily whispered, “And Dumbledore?”

“I told you three days ago that your sacrifice protected me, remember?” Lily nodded. “Well, your protection extended to anyone related to you as well. In other words, none of those vengeance-seeking Death Eaters could reach me if I was with someone related to you.”

“No...”

“I grew up with Aunt Petunia and her husband, blissfully unaware that magic existed.”

“Goodness...I’m so sorry...”

“ No point crying over spilt milk; I’m still here and relatively undamaged, after all. I even visit Petunia’s son, Dudley, and his girlfriend from time to time. He still clutches his bum every time I draw my wand – it’s hilarious.” Noticing Lily’s puzzlement, Harry explained the incident with Hagrid and his botched transfiguration. He was pleased to see Lily smile for the first time; it softened her features and made her look as pretty as the photos Harry had of her.

“Anyway, that’s my roundabout way of saying that I’ll understand whatever you have to say.”

Lily fidgeted with her glass, then said, “Have you ever felt that opening your Hogwarts letter was the worst mistake you ever made?”

“Yes,” said Harry, “quite a few times. There were long periods where I felt so out of love with the magical world that I wanted, more than anything else, to be rid of it. If I didn’t have the Dursleys waiting for me in the Muggle world, I’m quite sure I would’ve acted on it.”

She placed the glass of Butterbeer on the bedside table. “I’m sick of this war, Harry. I’m sick of preparing funeral speeches, I’m sick of this writhing, torturous despair, I’m sick of...” She trailed off and put her head in her hands.

Harry laid a sympathetic hand on her knee. “You’ve got to have hope in times like these. Voldemort’s goals are to enslave Muggles – everyone is affected by this war. If you had rejected the wizarding world, it would have lost a damn good witch and the fight against Voldemort would be a whole lot weaker than it is now. You lost your husband and only child, and I may never know what that feels like. But what I do know is that people look up to you. Throughout my time at Hogwarts, everyone who knew you told me what a great witch you were – they saw you as an integral part of the war. What I learnt the hard way is that we’ve got to be strong for those around us and never let lose the will to fight for what we believe in, because if we do that, Voldemort’s won already.”

"You're right," whispered Lily. "I can't let them die for nothing. I'll keep fighting...for them, it's the least they deserve. Thank you, Harry."

"Any time."

"And I'm sorry about Petunia."

"You've got nothing to be sorry about."

"I'd better go; Poppy wants to do some final checks on me."

"I'm surprised she let you go before doing it."

They shared a small smile as Lily rose from the bed and walked to the door. She stopped at the doorway and Harry went over to her. "Thank you, Harry, for everything."

"You're welcome...Lily. I suspect we'll see each other very soon."

"Yes, I hope so."

She hesitated for a moment, then hugged Harry briefly. The embrace felt so much like one of Hermione's that he was a little surprised that the hair brushing against his ear was straight and red, rather than bushy brown. She pulled away, shared one last smile with him and disappeared down the corridor.

Chapter IV: Blacks

It had been less than an hour since Lily left when there was another knock on the door. Harry called for Dumbledore to enter; they had agreed on three swift knocks followed by two slow ones to distinguish the headmaster. He had been reading up on how one reporter believed the Death Eaters were organised in an article so far-fetched, it read like comedy.

Harry closed the Daily Prophet and turned to face Dumbledore. To his surprise, he was not alone. By his side was a slightly younger Alastor Moody whose remaining normal eye was narrowed with suspicion. Seeing the two together took Harry back to his school days and the tri-wizard tournament. This world had a way of springing dead heroes on him...

“How are you this morning?” asked Dumbledore kindly.

“I’ve been better,” said Harry, “but I’ve been a lot worse.”

Dumbledore extended his hand towards Moody. “This is-”

“Alastor Moody, I know.”

“Ah, yes, you are well acquainted with him in your own world, are you not?”

“I was; he died protecting me in my seventh year.”

Moody’s eye narrowed further. His magical eye, as electric blue as Harry remembered it, was sweeping the room. “I am sorry to hear that,” said Dumbledore. “May I impose my company on you for a short while?”

“Yeah, make yourself at home.”

Dumbledore conjured a strangely ordinary wooden chair for himself. Moody, on the other hand, chose to lean against the wall, glowering at Harry as he did so.

“I know why you’re here,” said Harry, “you want to know whether or not I’ve made my decision.” Dumbledore nodded, smiling serenely. “Obviously, I want to help you. But you have to understand that I have to think about my loved ones first.”

“Wrong priorities,” muttered Moody.

Harry glanced at the Auror appraisingly and continued. “Even if I didn’t want to go back, which I do, I have commitments in my own world, and I keep my promises.”

Dumbledore’s smile did not drop. “Have you had the honour of reading the back copies of the Daily Prophet?” he asked.

“The relevant ones; reading between Skeeter’s lies, it seems like you’ve got a real problem on your hands, but I don’t see how I can help. Since he has no Horcruxes, I’m virtually useless.”

“Lazy,” mumbled Moody.

Harry raised an eyebrow at Dumbledore, who did not respond. “I must disagree. Like Bongolin the Benign, who felt his invention of the Disillusionment Charm would be poorly received, you are selling yourself short. I assure you we would relish the opportunity to benefit from your help.”

“Merlin, Albus,” muttered Moody, “we haven’t got all day. Get on with it.”

Dumbledore’s eyes danced with mirth for the first time Harry had seen him. “Please, do not let me deprive you of the opportunity to, ah, get on with it, Alastor.”

Wearing a scowl that would do an angry boar proud, Moody paced up and down the room. “We have a mission for you, Potter, one that, if it were up to me, I wouldn’t have you anywhere near.”

“Well, I’m sold,” said Harry, liking Moody less with every passing moment.

Moody stopped abruptly and stared with little more than hatred. “Think this is funny, do you?” he snarled. He closed the gap between them and grabbed Harry’s shoulder. For his part Harry did not flinch; instead, he stared at Moody stonily. “Even if Albus has fallen for your little ploy, I haven’t. Which one are you, eh?”

Moody was grunting like a boar, and Harry strained against the overwhelming presence of the Auror’s hot, alcohol-laden breath.

“Which what am I?” said Harry.

“Wait, let me guess. It can’t be Lestrage or Snape –”

Dumbledore peered at Moody with concern. “Alastor...”

“I have it! It’s Yaxley, isn’t it?”

He shook Harry roughly. “I would appreciate it if you let go of me,” said Harry, deciding to give Moody ten seconds.

Ten. Nine. Eight.

“Alastor, that is quite enough.”

Seven. Six.

“I can’t sit here and watch another Sirius Black slip through our net!”

Harry inhaled sharply. Another Sirius Black? Did this mean Sirius betrayed James and Lily? No, there was absolutely no way, no matter the dimension.

Then it dawned on him. Moody must still think Sirius was the Potters’ secret keeper. Harry’s heart sunk. Had Sirius already been framed? He was so busy thinking about his own predicament that he had completely forgotten to find Sirius and stop him chasing Wormtail.

Moody tightened his pincer-like grip on Harry's shoulder. Aggravated, Harry wrenched Moody's arm away. The Auror drew his wand. Harry drew his.

Suddenly, a blue-tinted, fence-like construction appeared from the ground and separated Harry and Moody. The power behind it caused the hairs at the back of Harry's neck to stand on end as they did when he had watched Dumbledore and Voldemort duel in the Ministry of Magic. Harry glanced at Dumbledore; he had not drawn his wand.

"Alastor, kindly leave us," said Dumbledore, no trace of humour in his voice now. "I will not tolerate duels of any form on the school grounds. Is that clear?"

Moody glared at Dumbledore, his working eye twitching with fury. "Your blind faith will kill us all," he snarled, and stormed from the room.

"I apologise for Alastor's behaviour," said Dumbledore, sounding as old as he looked. "He has endured quite enough this past year. After all, even the strongest dam will crumble if constantly pressured." The blue-tinted fence waned gradually until it was no longer visible.

"I understand," said Harry, recalling Remus' anger at him just months before his death.

Dumbledore leaned back on his chair and drummed his long fingers on the armrest. "How does one run an organisation in which there is no longer any trust?" he murmured, more to himself than Harry.

"By ceasing to trust yourself."

Dumbledore gave Harry a piercing stare. "Our impromptu decision to mask your identity has lent itself in our favour." Harry frowned, unaware he was involved in the decision-making process, while Dumbledore pulled a roll of expensive parchment from his pocket, tied with a golden ribbon. "I recovered this from Godric's Hollow." He handed the parchment to Harry, who could tell from the texture that it

was made of the highest quality Flourish and Blott's sold. Harry delicately untied the silk ribbon and unrolled the letter.

Dear James,

As you may already be aware, my son, Draco, will turn two on Tuesday 11th November. As such, the family will host a modest gathering in celebration of this momentous event.

In spite of your eloquent replies to my missives in the past, I am expecting your attendance, if not for me then for the nephew you have never laid eyes on. One can only hope you will set aside certain black influences and perform your familial duties.

I expect a reply within the week.

Your loving cousin,

Lucius

Harry looked up from the letter, horrified. James was related to Malfoy?

Dumbledore reading his expression, said, "Most of the pure-blood families are related, as you may well know. Growing up with Muggles and consequently amongst those that are foolishly considered unrefined –" Dumbledore's long nose twitched with disgust "– it is understandable that you have never been informed that Lucius and James were first cousins."

Harry glanced at the letter again, trying to think about anything other than Draco Malfoy's grandfather being a sibling of his own. "So Malfoy blames Sirius for James's attitude," he mumbled.

"Indeed, and the irony is that the delightful Walburga Black held James responsible for the fate of Sirius."

Harry tore his eyes away from the letter. "So you want me to attend this party masquerading as James."

“In essence.”

“And you don’t think Malfoy will realise I’m not James?”

“We will take steps towards averting such an occurrence.”

“And what if Voldemort’s realised I’m not James already?”

“He will not be attending the party.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “How can you be so sure?”

“There is evidence that suggests he is currently abroad, most likely in the Middle East.”

Harry frowned. Surely Snape wasn’t spying already? “How can you be sure?”

“I am afraid I cannot tell you,” said Dumbledore quietly.

“I see. I’m guessing it’s nothing to do with Severus Snape, then?”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. “I regret to inform you that Severus Snape has been a Death Eater since the day he left these gates.”

“Right,” said Harry, trying to keep the dubiety from his voice. “Look, what’s the point in this? It seems like a lot to risk; after all, if Malfoy finds out I’m not James, Voldemort will search for me with all his might, and my Occlumency isn’t exactly top-notch.”

“I admit there is the possibility of failure, as there is in any worthy endeavour. However, I shall ensure that you are well-versed in James’s mannerisms as well as certain pure-blood traditions you have henceforth been saved from.”

“You haven’t told me the point in this mission,” said Harry.

“Perceptive as ever, I see. Yes, there are quite concrete goals we hope to achieve. Firstly, the richest and most influential in wizarding society will be extended an invite. I would like you to discern which of these are sympathetic to Voldemort’s cause, paying particular attention to the politicians. We have, for some time now, suspected that Voldemort will attempt a coup and it is essential we discern the officials who are unapproachable.”

Harry frowned. “Why don’t we simplify things and make it a simple retrieval mission?”

“I am afraid I do not follow.”

“Someone gets in undetected, overcomes and kidnaps a highly-ranked Death Eater and brings them back for interrogation?”

“Alastor suggested a similar scenario,” said Dumbledore. “However, we cannot underestimate the heavy wards around the Malfoys’ manor. Furthermore, it is highly likely that Voldemort has sworn his most favoured with oaths of secrecy. In the event that he has not, it would be unwise to show him our hand too early, for it will destroy any possibility of your return to your own world.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The most important objective of this assignment is the retrieval of the stolen scrolls on the subject of Nebuchadnezzar’s Archway.”

“You think they’re at Malfoy Manor?”

“It would not surprise me. Voldemort, when in the country, resides there, so it follows the scrolls do also. However, they will be under heavy protection, and I do not expect its full retrieval. Indeed, merely confirming its location would be enough to be getting on with.”

It was Harry’s turn to drum his fingers on the table as he weighed up the pros and cons of accepting the mission. On one hand, it would embroil him further in the war, something he wished to avoid at all costs, but on the other, it was his best chance of finding the all-

important scrolls. And he had some idea of where Malfoy would keep them – the same room he kept Luna and Ollivander in.

Harry looked at Dumbledore, who looked far more worn and troubled than he had ever seen him. A wave of guilt passed through him. This was Dumbledore, the giant whose shoulder Harry had stood on. Dumbledore, the man who had saved Harry's life in more ways than one. Dumbledore, who had lost his entire family but still treated Harry as a son. The same Albus Dumbledore now wanted a favour from him, and Harry had considered refusing.

"I'll do it," said Harry.

Dumbledore's ancient face broke into a smile. "You are truly kind, Harry."

"Ok, we've got a week or so to make me indistinguishable from James. Is that enough time?"

"Yes, I am confident of that. We must now handle the issue of your partner."

"What?"

"At social occasions such as these, it is customary for a suitable pure-blooded witch to accompany the wizard. It was one of the reasons behind James's disregard for the Malfoy family, who are the greatest proponents of pure-blood tradition."

"But wouldn't it be a bit suspicious if James doesn't take his wife?"

"To you or I, perhaps, but to Mr Malfoy and others of his ilk, it will be an olive branch; a symbolic gesture, if you will."

"Who did you have in mind?"

"Another who finds herself in a similar position as James did."

Harry racked his brains, then laughed. "You don't mean Dromeda?"

Dumbledore readjusted his glasses. "A fine guess, I must say, very fine."

"But...that's preposterous! She's married to Ted Tonks, for one!"

Dumbledore smiled sadly. "You are burdened with the assumption that your partner equates with someone you love. In the highest strata of society, Harry, there is rarely ever any love between two bonded in matrimony. Indeed, it is merely a convenient arrangement, be that economic, social or political. If there is no love between two who are married, nothing will be expected of yourself and Mrs Tonks. Rather, it is a symbolic gesture; you have put the welfare of your nephew above any familial dispute, as Mr Malfoy hinted towards."

"But why was Dromeda invited? I mean, she's been blasted off the Black family tapestry!"

"I think you are underestimating the power of sisterly love. Perhaps I am a fool, but I believe that unlike the charming Bellatrix Lestrange, Narcissa Malfoy harbours some feelings of affection towards Mrs Tonks; after all, they have shared their childhoods. A more cynical man would argue Mrs Malfoy is simply asserting her reputation as a generous hostess."

Harry's mouth twitched. Narcissa Malfoy had finally reconciled with Dromeda in his own dimension, thanks in part to Dromeda's concerted efforts rather than any undying sisterly love on Narcissa Malfoy's part. Harry had always been humbled by her ability to forgive; he was not sure he could do the same.

Meanwhile, Dumbledore had conjured his remarkable phoenix Patronus whose resemblance to Fawkes was astonishing. He whispered something to it, before the magnificent bird disappeared in a flash of silver flame. At Harry's raised eyebrow, Dumbledore said, "I am warning Mrs Tonks that she should expect some company."

"You're going to visit her?" said Harry.

“Yes, I find letters too impersonal in matters such as this. My only wish is for you to accompany me.”

Harry bit his lip. Would seeing Dromeda shake his resolve? No, he had already met his dead mother and he still wanted nothing more than to return to his own world. His natural curiosity in finding out what Dromeda was like in her relative youth won out.

“Fine.”

Dumbledore smiled and the mirthful glint returned to his clear blue eyes. With a lazy twist of his wand, a bag of Floo powder appeared. He was beside the fire in two long strides, Harry close behind him.

He took a handful of Floo powder, handed the bag to Harry and, throwing the powder into the fire, said, “Sixteen Dorking Road.”

Harry followed suit and, after enduring the entirely uncomfortable sensation of Floo travel, landed hands first on a patterned red carpet. Slightly embarrassed, he jumped to his feet and wiped the soot from his glasses.

“Like mother like son, it seems,” said Dumbledore, chuckling.

“Yeah, go on, laugh it off.”

Harry shot Dumbledore a mock glare before perusing the room he had so unceremoniously rolled into. The first thing he noticed was how bright it was. Light streamed in from two open windows bordered with beige curtains billowing softly in the breeze. The carpet was in fact a large rug, surrounded by burnished beech floorboards. Running parallel to each other were two sofas, one a deep red, the other as white as the walls, and forming an island between them was a mahogany coffee table. It was welcoming, but hinted at sophistication; very Andromeda.

Harry opened his mouth to ask where Andromeda was when a small girl, no older than six, ran into the room, screaming with mirth. Her shoulder-length blonde hair glinted in the midday sun as it swayed

from side to side like a flag in a breeze. He caught sight of a blue and white chequered dress, probably Muggle school uniform, as she flitted between the sofa and round dining table and vaulted over the coffee table.

She caught sight of Harry and her grey eyes lit up. "Uncle James!" she shrieked and, to Harry's surprise, she dived onto Harry's right shin and held in a pincer-like grip. Harry stepped back in shock, almost tripped over and, without letting go of his leg, the girl gave a familiar laugh.

Then it dawned on him. The mannerisms, the pale skin, the shrieking laugh; it was a chilling reminder of Teddy. The girl hugging his leg must be Tonks, and the thought of it made his breath catch in his throat.

"Nymphadora Tonks!"

Harry flicked his gaze towards the unmistakable figure of Andromeda Tonks, her hands on her hips. She seemed familiar, but not in the way Harry had expected. An involuntary shiver ran down his spine as he realised she looked identical to Bellatrix Lestrange at the trial in Dumbledore's Pensieve. She had the same heavy-lidded eyebrows and the same self-assured, aristocratic beauty he had seen in both Bellatrix and Sirius but, if her flyaway hair was anything to go by, she seemed far more harried than Harry remembered.

"How many times have I told you that you must treat guests with respect?" Harry glanced down at Tonks in time to see her send her mother a cheeky grin. "I'm sorry you have to put up with this every time, James."

"That's alright," said Harry.

"How are Lily and little Harry?"

"Quite well," said Harry, hoping that was the response she was expecting.

Apparently it was, because she turned to the headmaster. “Professor Dumbledore, what a pleasant surprise. Where are my manners? Please take a seat, both of you. Dora, I swear if you don’t let go of Uncle James’ leg...”

Tonks – no, Dora; calling a child by her surname just seemed wrong – glowered at her mother and reluctantly let go of Harry’s leg, allowing him to sit on the beige sofa. He was joined by Dumbledore and Dora sat between them, staring up at the headmaster curiously.

“Andromeda, my dear,” said Dumbledore kindly, “I am afraid you have not asked me the security question.”

“Oh, yes, how could I forget? What did my dear mother call you in that letter?”

“A blithering, meddlesome old coot, if my memory serves me correctly,” said Dumbledore blithely, eliciting a laugh from Dora.

“What would you both like to drink? Tea, coffee, water?”

“You know how partial I am to your fantastic coffee,” said Dumbledore.

Andromeda blushed slightly, turning to Harry, who said, “Nothing at the moment, thanks.”

She raised an eyebrow before bustling away, probably to the kitchen.

“I like your hat,” said Dora, as soon as her mother was out of earshot. “It’s funny.”

Dumbledore, bemused, removed his crooked, star-laden hat and peered at it over his half-moon spectacles. “This old thing?”

“Yeah! Can I try it on?” she said, her eyes brimming with excitement.

“I do not see why not, do you, Mr Potter?”

“No, I can’t think of a reason, Mr Dumbledore.”

“Then we shall bestow Miss Tonks with the hat.”

Dora, looking up between the two men, giggled. “You’re funny.” Dumbledore lowered his hat onto Dora’s head and Harry watched as half her head disappeared. “Hey! I can’t see!”

“Let us see if we can remedy that,” said Dumbledore, his eyes dancing. He gave the hat three taps with his wand and it shrunk until it fit Dora perfectly. “Better, my dear?”

“Yeah, thanks! Hey, look what I can do!” She clenched her fists and squeezed her eyes shut and, slowly, her blonde hair turned jet black.

“Quite remarkable, Miss Tonks, I must applaud you.” Dora flushed at the praise.

Harry caught a whiff of rich coffee and, turning to the door, found that Andromeda had returned to the room with a mug of steaming coffee. She took one glance at her daughter and sighed in defeat. “Go and play with your new broom in the garden, darling.” Not needing to be told twice, Dora leapt to her feet and ran out of the garden door at the other end of the room. Handing the coffee to Dumbledore, she said, “She can be a handful sometimes, she’s got more energy than sense.”

“That, my dear, is the beauty of youth.”

“So how are you both? Oh, this must be the first time I’ve seen you here, or anywhere, without Sirius, James.”

“Please, take a seat,” said Dumbledore, “I have a long tale to regale you with.”

Looking between the two men, Andromeda said, “Will Ted need to hear this?”

“I would appreciate it if you kept this information to yourself, my dear, unless, of course, you have taught him the most jealously guarded of Black talents.”

“Of course not,” said Andromeda, her eyes narrowed. She took a seat on the red sofa opposite them. “It matters not either way, he is at work.”

Harry glanced out of the window as Dora flew past the window in a children’s broom similar to the one Harry had bought Teddy for his sixth birthday. Dumbledore’s miniature hat clashed horribly with her now purple hair.

“You have received, of course, an invitation to young Draco Malfoy’s birthday party?”

“Yes,” said Andromeda, absently playing with the ring on her wedding finger.

“Have you considered attending?”

“Of course not. I would rather eat Flobberworms than expose my Dora to those ghastly bigots.”

“Would you reconsider as a favour to an old man?” said Dumbledore, politely.

Andromeda wrung her hands uncomfortably. “Professor...”

“Please, call me Albus.”

“Look, Albus, the invitation was nothing more than a nicety; my dear sister...wait, why do you want me to go?”

Dumbledore took a sip of his coffee. “There are details involved that I am not at liberty to...”

Harry sighed; typical Dumbledore. He expected to hear all the information he asked for but wanted to give none himself. “Look, she

deserves to know. You can't ask her to do a favour and keep things from her, especially if she knows Occlumency."

Dumbledore's smile faltered for the briefest moment. "Quite right, I apologise, Andromeda."

Andromeda gave Harry a piercing look, and he knew that his cover as James had been blown. It did not matter; he knew she would figure it out sooner or later.

Dumbledore explained, in as little detail as possible, the mission Harry would embark on. There were some notable details he glossed over, such as searching for the scrolls, but Harry was satisfied with what he did tell her. To her credit, Andromeda did not react once; she sat perfectly still, listening attentively.

"You can therefore understand," said Dumbledore, finally, "the utmost importance of the part you must play."

Andromeda took a stray lock of her dark hair and carefully placed it behind her ear. "I take it he is not James, then."

"No, I'm not."

Dumbledore shot him a look of polite warning. "His identity must remain hidden, my dear, even from you, I am afraid."

"I see. Am I to understand that Dora is accompanying us?"

Dumbledore inclined his head. Andromeda sighed and said, "You are truly in my debt, Professor."

"Indeed –"

"Actually," said Andromeda, her eyes suddenly alive with hope, "I can think of one little favour you could do for me."

Harry could sense Dumbledore's tension, though his expression remained inviting as ever. "Ask away, my dear."

She glanced at Harry and said, "I wonder if you could give me access to Alice and her family. They must be getting awfully lonely, and I miss her dearly."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. He had once walked in on Andromeda, surrounded with photos of Ted, Dora and Alice, weeping. It had been the first time he had seen her show weakness, and he did not think he would ever forget it.

"That is not an unreasonable request," said Dumbledore. He rose to his feet and whispered something into Andromeda's ear. "I must impress upon you the caution with which you must use that information. Do not visit more than once a week, and especially do not do form a visiting pattern. This is for your own safety rather than the Longbottoms's."

Andromeda nodded earnestly, and Harry got the distinct impression that she had not expected Dumbledore to give her the secret. "Now," said Dumbledore, "I am afraid we must depart. A pleasure as always, Andromeda."

"Likewise, Headmaster, our door is always open."

"You are too kind."

Harry got up, feeling distinctly uncomfortable. Ever since Dumbledore had revealed he was not James, there had been a peculiar atmosphere, one he would be glad to be rid of.

"I shall ensure Dora returns your hat, then, shall I?" said Andromeda, looking as though she had sucked a particularly sour sweet.

"Oh, no, she is welcome to keep it," said Dumbledore, smiling.

"Keep it? No, no, I'll send it along when she gets bored of it – tonight, most likely."

"I insist, my dear, I daresay I have too many hats in my possession."

Andromeda gave him a look that said 'this is not over' as Dumbledore conjured his bag of Floo powder. He looked over his shoulder to give Harry a disconcertingly knowing look before disappearing in a green flash of fire.

Harry wondered what the headmaster had meant by the look as he grabbed his own handful of Floo. As he took a step into the green fire, Andromeda said, "Wait!"

Harry almost dropped Dumbledore's Floo bag in surprise. What could Andromeda possibly want from him? Ever so slightly adopting a defensive position, he turned to face her. She gave him another one of her piercing looks and appeared as though she was struggling with her words.

"I know who you are," she said, finally, "that is why I agreed."

Harry's froze. How? And if she knew, what was to stop Voldemort...

Cautiously as he dared, he slipped his right hand into his pocket. "What?"

"I – I know your true identity. Harry, unless I am mistaken, Harry Potter."

He wrapped his hand around his wand. If push came to shove, he could Obliviate her. "And what would give you that idea?"

"Lily."

"Lily's at Hogwarts, you can't possibly have –"

"I visited her yesterday. I did not mean to, I mean sometimes one cannot help oneself..."

"You used Legilimency on her," said Harry.

She blanched a little, but Harry did not soften his expression. “You do not understand the...difficulty one finds in controlling the magic, particularly when the thoughts and feelings are brimming at the surface as hers were. I try not to use it, truly I do, but she was like a chandelier, and I a moth.”

Harry felt his mouth itch irritably. “Right.”

“I apologise, truly, I do...”

“I think you should be apologising to her, not me.”

“Yes, and I will at the first opportunity.” Neither spoke, and the silence was only interrupted by Dora’s screams of delight. Andromeda was entirely different from the one in his world, Harry decided. She was better-spoken, more troubled and altogether less subtle. He watched as she stared out into the garden, playing with her wedding ring, and noticed for the first time the bags under her eyes.

“Are you alright?” said Harry, deciding to drop the Legilimency issue.

Andromeda snapped out of her reverie as if a jolt of electricity had passed through her. “Y – Yes , of course. Harry – I mean, Mr Potter –”

“Harry’s fine.”

“May I – may I ask you a question?”

“It depends what the question is.”

She put another stray strand of black hair behind her ear before speaking. “I – I must know, with the wizarding world as it is... Will any harm befall my daughter? In the future, I mean.”

Harry looked at her squarely, his mind racing. He could tell her that Dora grew up to be an Auror on the front line. He could tell her she got caught up in Dumbledore’s Order. He could tell her it came down

the final battle. He could tell her that the most dangerous Death Eater killed her. He could tell her that her only daughter's son grew up an orphan.

But he could not bring himself to do it. Instead, "No, she was fine."

Andromeda breathed a sigh of relief and, for the first time, broke into a smile. "Thank you, Harry. I – I had to know."

"Mummy! Look at me!"

Dora had somehow managed to dangle upside-down from the dining table with only her legs holding her in support. Miraculously, Dumbledore's hat remained firmly in place. Andromeda gasped and quickly moved to turn Dora the right way up.

"You silly girl, you could have hurt yourself!"

"When are we going to play hide-and-seek?" moaned Dora, her hands on her hips.

"We shan't play if you continue with such naughtiness."

As Andromeda turned back to face Harry, Dora adopted Andromeda's black hair and pale, aristocratic features and performed an imitation so accurate, it was all Harry could do not to laugh.

Suddenly, as Dora stalked from the room, Andromeda grimaced and her hand went to her right bicep. "Are you alright?" said Harry, alarmed.

"Yes," she said hoarsely, "fine." Her eyes watered and a vein ran down her reddening temple.

"Where's the pain coming from?" said Harry, drawing his wand. If worst came to worst, he would have to Apparate her to St Mungo's and come back for Dora.

"It is...nothing..."

Harry rushed forward, running through the few medical spells he knew. He ripped the right sleeve of her bottle green robes and felt his mouth fall open. Just beneath her shoulder, engraved in charcoal black, was the Black family coat of arms, complete with the 'toujours pur' insigne. Most troubling of all was the bold, red 'BLOOD TRAITOR' written underneath.

"They brand you?" breathed Harry, horrified by the barbarism of the Black family. Even he would not have thought they stooped so low.

Andromeda exhaled as though she had been holding her breath for ten minutes. "It has passed; thank you."

Harry could not believe she was not taking the matter seriously. Her family had mauled her skin like some criminal from the Middle Ages!

"How can you not see anything wrong with that?"

Andromeda mended her robe silently. "They know not what they do."

"And they can just torture you like this whenever they want?"

"No, no, of course not. Traditionally, the coat of arms informs members of family when others are in danger. However, since I am a blood traitor, it only informs me when other blood traitors are walking into trouble."

"Sirius, then?" said Harry, not sure which he found more bewildering; her apathy towards the tattoo, or her lack of concern for Sirius' well-being.

"Yes, he has been walking in and out of trouble for nigh on a year now, unfortunately."

"And he knows it does this to you?"

“Do not worry yourself, Harry. Sirius, while a darling, is foolhardy to the extreme – I am sure he would stop to think if he could, but I am afraid it is in his blood to be lead by his heart.”

“Do you know where he is?” demanded Harry, intent on whacking some sense into the Marauder.

“There is no need...Ted has tried more times than is healthy, after all. He will settle down one day, I am sure, but for now it is best to –”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“Truly there is no –”

“Maybe I can help him,” said Harry, trying to appear reasonable.

Andromeda bit her lip anxiously. “I suppose it would not hurt to check up on him. It has been a while, after all...”

“Yes, just Apparate me there, and you can get back to To- your daughter.”

“Grip on to my arm,” she said, offering her left arm. Harry obliged, and was surprised at how cold her skin was; it felt like a tendril of cold water was running up his hand.

Then, in the blink of an eye, the silence of Number Sixteen Dorking Road was replaced with a cocktail of sound. There was the groan of engines, the bellowing voices of market traders and the impassioned squawking of at least three teenage girls. They had arrived in a quiet alleyway, but before him was a Muggle high street packed with shoppers trying to mill past one another. What was Sirius doing here?

Harry drew his wand and made sure they had not been seen. He spotted a small girl clutching her teddy staring at them wide-eyed at the entrance of the alleyway, but otherwise, their entrance had gone unnoticed.

“Go back,” murmured Harry, “I’ll take it from here.” The soft pop from over his shoulder told him she had obeyed.

Harry went to the spot the small girl had been before her mother took her away and cast his eyes up and down the high street.

Assess and evaluate.

The wide, three-lane road was flanked by narrow pavements made even narrower by the disjointed rows of market stalls. Harried commuters weaved in and out of the mothers trying to simultaneously control their toddlers and find the cheapest apples, oranges or bananas. The air was thick with smoke, both from cigarettes and car exhausts. There was no way he could spot Sirius if he had decided to hide amongst the Muggles. He would have to wait for Sirius to give his position away.

Harry tried to ignore the distant hum of a motorbike as he, surreptitiously as possible, scanned the faces of every man that passed by.

“Rat!” screeched a woman.

Harry whirled around so quickly, his head felt momentarily light. A tall, thin, middle-aged woman was rooted to the spot, her face aghast. The shoppers milling around her were looking around, bewildered, with many craning their necks to find out the source of the commotion. Harry almost dismissed it, when he saw a short, fat rat darting between the moving cars.

Could it be?

Harry edged past the dawdling mothers in order to get a closer look at the rat. After all, it would not hurt to be cautious.

Suddenly, a movement in the sky caught his eye. A small pocket of air was shimmering as though it were an African desert rather than a grey day in London. The shimmer air, which was moving closer to ground, had not gone unnoticed, not least because it was roaring like

an engine. Many shoppers had come to a complete stop, and were pointing. Harry, trying not to draw attention to himself, trained his wand on the flickering figure.

He knew it would be Sirius. Who else had a flying motorbike? Who else would be reckless enough to fly it into a main road packed with Muggles?

The cars had come to a stop and were tracking the movement of the motorbike, which was now flickering in and out of view.

Then he realised. If Sirius was on his motorbike, that meant the rat was...

Harry broke into a run, pushing past people as he did so. He had to get to Wormtail before Sirius did. He glanced over his shoulder. Sirius was now completely visible; he was riding a colossal motorbike that defied gravity with its every movement. His unkempt black hair fell into his narrowed, grey eyes. His haughty features were twisted into a mask of fury and absolute loathing. Harry willed himself to run faster; Sirius was catching him with every step.

Harry struggled for breath as he pushed aside a businessman; he was intent on catching Wormtail, who was scurrying five cars ahead of him.

“I’ll catch you, you filthy traitor!” he heard over the din of the motorbike’s engine.

Harry’s legs begged him to stop as Sirius flew over him, the roar of machinery almost deafening him. His chest felt like it would explode.

Then Wormtail transformed.

Harry ground to a halt at least six car lengths away from where Wormtail was standing. His hands were on his knees and he was gasping for air. Pettigrew was as short and portly as his middle-aged counterpart. Harry could just about make out his pointed nose and rat-like face.

“How could you, Sirius?” he yelled. “He was your best friend! How could you?”

Sirius had brought the motorbike to a halt mere metres from Wormtail and was advancing on the traitor with long, angry strides. Harry straightened up and approached the two.

“You dare...” breathed Sirius. “With your traitorous, Death Eater mouth! YOU DARE?”

“They were innocent! You were his best man! And James... Merlin, what have you done?”

“Crucio!”

The thick red light missed Wormtail by inches.

“And now you want to finish me off, too!”

Harry could see Pettigrew glancing around, planning the spell that would blow up the street, killing thirteen innocent people. But he would be damned if he would let it happen again.

“Stupefy,” whispered Harry, and Wormtail collapsed before he knew what him.

Sirius turned on his heel, caught between wrath and bewilderment. As he caught sight of Harry, what little colour in his face drained away.

“James?” he whispered, his handsome eyes widening.

“You need to get away from here.”

“No, it can’t be... I saw your body at the Hollow...”

“Listen to me, Sirius, the Obliviators will be here soon. They will want to take you in for questioning. You must get away from here.”

Sirius raised his wand. "You're a Death Eater."

"I am not a Death Eater. Use your mind for once and Apparate!"

Sirius, however, was not listening. He brought his wand down like a sword, but Harry was ready for him and deflected the curse. Sirius' jaw set and he sent a powerful Bludgeoning Hex at him, which Harry blocked with a summoned handbag.

"I am not a Death Eater, and you aren't in your right mind," said Harry as fragments of fabric rained down on them.

"Come here to help your friend, did you?"

Harry considered his options as he dodged a nasty Bone-breaking Hex. He could incapacitate Sirius without hurting him, then take him back to Hogwarts, or he could try and talk some sense into him. Yeah, because that's worked well so far, said a snarky voice at the back of his mind. Harry had decided to take Sirius down with a well-placed stunner when –

"This is the Ministry of Magic. Put your wands down. You are under arrest."

Harry glanced up at the sky to find they were surrounded by at least a dozen Hit Wizards riding Cleansweeps.

"You see what you've done?" snarled Harry. Why did Sirius have to be so pig-headed? Why could he not have just listened?

Sirius, however, had taken one final, longing look at Wormtail's unconscious form then dashed for his motorbike.

"I repeat, you are under arrest for breaking the International Statute of Secrecy. Place your wands on the floor and put your hands behind your heads. This is your final warning."

Harry could see what Sirius was attempting and, instead of fruitlessly trying to convince him not to, he plotted his own escape. Predictably,

Sirius leapt on to his motorbike and almost instantly disappeared. Harry added averting the course of justice to his growing list of offenses as he sprinted towards Wormtail's limp form.

As he had expected, the Hit Wizards were momentarily torn and, in the few seconds he had been given, Harry Apparated both Wormtail and himself to the Shrieking Shack, wondering all the while how Dumbledore was going to keep Sirius out of Azkaban.

Chapter V: Malfoy

A week had passed. Harry trudged up a narrow country lane running parallel to a narrow river, itself trickling apathetically downstream. His polished leather shoes clicked against the granite, and his expensive silver robes fluttered gently in the light breeze. The setting sun had washed the sky with reds, oranges and purples, illuminating the sprawling Wiltshire countryside for the last precious minutes of the daytime.

Dumbledore had imprisoned the rat in a disused classroom on the second floor and, like magic, the charges against Sirius and 'James' were dropped. Since Crouch had come down hard on crime, Harry guessed he had achieved this less than legally. But Harry was worried about Wormtail escaping, or Sirius finding out where the rat was and doing something he would regret. So far, though, he had remained away – from both Wormtail and the Order.

Harry finally saw the bridge in the distance, complete with two dark figures, one considerably shorter than the other. As he drew closer, they came into focus. Andromeda was wearing purple, fur-lined satin dress robes. In the diminishing light, it shimmered relentless, more liquid than solid. Clutching her hand was Dora, who had chosen long, wavy, blonde hair and a silver necklace that was probably worth more than the Burrow and everything inside it.

“Andy, my favourite blood traitor!” greeted Harry, practising his persona as James. Over the past week, Dumbledore had shown him countless Pensieve memories and role played with him, making sure Harry’s disguise as James was beyond perfection. He had to hand it to the headmaster, he was fantastically meticulous.

“Good evening, James,” said Andromeda, as Harry knelt on one knee and kissed her pale hand, one of the many customs Dumbledore made sure Harry picked up.

“Uncle James!” cried Dora.

“Snitch time!” said Harry, and in one fluid movement lifted Dora, let her hang in the air unsupported for a split second then caught her. It was James’s trademark greeting for children and Harry had spent hours perfecting it.

“Again! Again!” cried Dora, slightly flushed.

“We’ve got to go to the party now, Nymphasnorers,” said Harry.

“Don’t call me that!” snapped Dora, her hands on her hips. “I don’t snore!”

“If you say so,” said Harry, taking her hand while Andromeda took the other. She gave Harry a surreptitious nod, and he felt a little relieved. His act was believable.

While Dora regaled him with tales of her friend Elsa and her wonderful new teacher, Harry scanned the area. Past the bridge, the lane was bordered on the left by wild, low-growing brambles, on the right by a high, neatly manicured hedge, blocking the manor from view. It was a sensible arrangement, particularly for the centre of Death Eater operations.

They turned right into a wide driveway that led off the lane. The high hedge curved with them, running off into the distance beyond a pair of impressive wrought-iron gates that were thrown open, the words ‘Happy Birthday, Draco’ curved in the air immediately above them.

No sooner did they pass between the gates did a House-elf appear immediately before them. Harry started, but immediately recovered. It was Dobby.

“Welcome to Malfoy Manor, sir and misses,” he said, his great bat-like ears drooping dejectedly. “What are your names?”

“James Potter and Andromeda Tonks,” said Harry.

“Please wait here, sir.”

Dobby disappeared, and Harry turned to Andromeda, who looked very pale and particularly nervous. “It’ll be alright,” said Harry, “just remember the surveillance techniques I taught you. If you really can’t hack any more, excuse yourself and leave without me. If you’re in genuine danger –”

“ – take the Portkey with Dora, I know,” said Andromeda.

“I know who most of the Death Eaters are, remember, so don’t get too worked up about identifying them. I’ll probably slip away within the hour, despite Dumbledore’s estimates. When I do, whatever you do, don’t linger. We don’t want –”

“ – a hostage situation. Yes, you’ve intimidated as much.”

Harry smiled. He had spent the entire day yesterday rehearsing with Andromeda, and filling her in on the best methods of eavesdropping. She had been an extraordinarily quick learner, approaching Hermione in speed, by his reckoning.

Long platinum hair, a beacon against the fading colours of dusk, appeared from the darkness. The resemblance between the man approaching them and Draco Malfoy was startling, from the upward sneer to the snake-head cane. As he approached, Dora’s grip on his hand tightened.

“ James,” said Malfoy, “so glad you could make it. Oh, and Andromeda, what a pleasant surprise.” He fixed them both with a cold smile.

“I have a birthday present for your son,” said Harry petulantly, engorging the top-of-the-range children’s broom Dumbledore had provided for him.

“That is very kind of you,” said Malfoy, banishing the box, “Draco will be extremely pleased.”

The gravel crackled under their feet as Malfoy led them towards the handsome manor house. There was a rustling in the hedges, but it

turned out to be nothing more than a fine, white peacock stalking along the top of the hedge in the opposite direction. Malfoy glanced at it humourlessly, but otherwise paid little attention to it. As they drew closer, the doors to the manor open inwardly to reveal a luxurious entrance hall. Embroidered carpet, crystal chandeliers, stain-glassed windows, imperious, gold-framed portraits. It reeked of wealth.

Harry arranged his face into one of mild disgust, as he had been advised to and, as Dumbledore had predicted, Malfoy paid no heed. Instead, he led them towards the source of the soft music that floated down the entrance hall.

“There are some people I must introduce you to, James,” said Malfoy briskly, laying a firm hand on Harry’s shoulder, ignoring Andromeda and Dora entirely. “They are quite brilliant in their chosen fields, I am sure you will agree.”

He steered Harry to the left, through the door that came before a gently spiralling marble staircase. It opened to reveal a large, cavernous hall at least half the size of the Great Hall at Hogwarts. It was dominated by four gargantuan family portraits, one on each wall, and every witch and wizard in each possessed the same platinum blonde hair. Surrounding the portraits were ornate, child-sized marble sculptures of unicorns that tossed their heads and shook their manes every so often. But even these remarkable creations could not eclipse the magnificent fountain that sat at the centre of the room. What appeared to be liquid gold cascaded from a life-sized mermaid made entirely of glass, or perhaps ice.

But Harry did not have time to linger on the extraordinary craftsmanship, for Malfoy was already directing him towards a small group of people sitting a stone’s throw from a slightly raised platform holding the musicians.

“My wife, of course,” said Malfoy, almost absent-mindedly.

To Harry’s surprise, Narcissa Malfoy was...beautiful. In his own world, Dromeda had always told him that Narcissa was the most attractive of the Blacks, but Harry had not believed her – until now. Her blonde

hair cascaded elegantly around her pale face effortlessly and complemented her piercing blue eyes. She had not yet developed the trademark sneer, but instead smiled politely as she offered Harry her hand.

“Good evening, Narcissa,” said Harry, bowing his head slightly to kiss her hand.

“This is Cygnus Zonko,” said Malfoy before Narcissa could reply. He pointed towards a stooped, sickly-looking man with large, round glasses.

“Ah, the infamous James Potter,” said Zonko. “Lucius tells me you single-handedly kept my business afloat in your years at Hogwarts.”

“And you single-handedly helped me set a Hogwarts record for detentions,” said Harry, smiling, “and for that, I thank you, sir.”

Zonko laughed so hard it startled Harry. Zonko had noticed, too, it seemed, and a flush of colour pierced his white skin. “Actually, I was just telling Lucius about the discovery of a secret entrance to the ancient Lighthouse of Alexandria. Have you heard of it?”

“I can’t say that I have,” said Harry, subduing his excitement. The Lighthouse was one of the Seven Ancient Wonders; Dumbledore was right, Zonko was an enthusiast. There was the chance he could help Harry with the scrolls once he had recovered them.

“You have not inherited your father’s love of ancient history, then,” said Zonko, dismayed. “He and I were rather close, you know. I was so gutted when I heard the news...”

“We all were,” said Malfoy in a tone of voice that disapproved of the topic. Zonko seemed to have realised and instantly changed tact.

“Anytime you want to come by the shop,” said Zonko, handing Harry a card, “you’re more than welcome to. It’s the least I can do.”

“Thank you, Mr Zonko,” said Harry politely, pocketing the card. He would definitely visit the man to ascertain what he knew of the Archway.

“You must have heard of Newt Scamander,” said Lucius, steering James around the table. Harry politely shook the hand of a short, ancient man with a round face and remarkably long beard. They continued around the table and he shook hands with some of the most powerful men in the wizarding world. Finally, he came to a face he knew all too well. “Cornelius Fudge here has just been promoted to Senior Undersecretary. He is here in the Minister’s stead who, unfortunately, could not make it tonight.” Harry offered Fudge a brief, cold smile before looking over his shoulder. To his dismay, Dobby was leading Andromeda to a separate table on the other side of the magnificent fountain and Dora to a table comprising of children.

“Take a seat,” said Malfoy, gesturing towards one of the leather chairs – no, thrones – beside Fudge. It was an order, not a request.

“I would not want to stain a table of intellectuals, Lucius,” said Harry, lacing his words with venom.

“I insist,” said Malfoy, smiling dangerously.

“No, I insist,” said Harry and he strutted to the table nearest the door. It was a calculated move on his part, one that Dumbledore had advised him not to do. But Dumbledore had been mistaken – the only Death Eaters on Malfoy’s table were Lysander Yaxley and Romulus Lestrange; the Order already knew about them. Then there was the small matter of the fountain being perfectly positioned to block Harry from Lucius’ view.

The table he had chosen looked like a who’s-who of Azkaban. The Lestrange brothers, Avery, Rookwood, Nott, Travers, Crabbe, Goyle, Bellatrix, Snape, Regulus. All young, all foolish, all glaring at him, all Death Eaters.

“What are you doing here, Potter?” snarled Snape, his sallow face contorted with rage.

“I’m wondering the same thing, Snivellus,” replied Harry, slipping into the seat beside Regulus, who shifted slightly away from him. It gave him a good view of both Andromeda and Dora and was close enough to the door that he could slip away.

Harry had to hand it to Dumbledore – his idea of recreating the dinner exactly for practice was a stroke of genius. It allowed him to bury his rage towards Bellatrix and any feelings of pity for Regulus and Snape.

“You’re a Potter,” hissed Bellatrix. Without the influence of Azkaban, she looked like Andromeda’s twin.

“And you’re a Black.”

“A Lestranger, actually,” said Rodolphus, his eyes narrowed.

“Congratulations,” said Harry sarcastically. He took Regulus’ drink out of the poor boy’s hand and sipped it. “So sorry, I haven’t interrupted important Death Eater business, have I?”

The reaction was instantaneous. Regulus paled, Rookwood’s eyes narrowed and Bellatrix drew her wand. “You and your filthy blood traitor mouth!”

“Bella,” said Rodolphus warningly.

Snape mumbled something that Harry did not quite catch. “You’ll have to speak up, Snivelly.”

“I said you’ll get yours soon,” said Snape.

“Severus, that is quite enough,” said Rodolphus.

“No, let him speak,” said Harry. “I’ll get mine soon? Let’s hope it’s fifth time lucky, eh?”

“I do not know what you are insinuating, Potter,” said Rodolphus evenly, “but Lucius has request absolute civility at his son’s birthday.”

So Rodolphus outranks them, thought Harry. He was surprised, he had to admit; he had expected Rookwood to have been in charge, but the thin man seemed content to blend into the background and say nothing.

Dobby appeared behind Bellatrix and, trembling with fear, said, “Master is reminding his guests that ill will is not tolerated.”

Things settled down from then on, and the power Malfoy had over the Death Eaters became apparent. As the polite conversation on politics and economics dragged on, Harry made a mental chain of command. Underneath Voldemort, it seemed, was Lucius. He guessed Yaxley and Romulus Lestrange were in the same bracket, judging by the way they were confidently regaling the main table with stories Harry could not hear. The way he controlled the conversation at his own table told Harry Rodolphus Lestrange came next, but it could be that Malfoy had given him that power for this night only. Most of the occupants of his table seemed equals, though Bellatrix undoubtedly thought otherwise.

Then there were three he could not place; the three who had yet to say a word. Harry knew Nott’s son to be an extremely competent Unspeakable and he assumed his father was a skilled wizard, too. Even more inscrutable was Augustus Rookwood, whose silence was palpably different to Nott’s. Harry got the feeling that Nott said nothing because he considered himself above those at the table, but it was almost as though Rookwood did not want to be noticed. Unlike Nott, who cut an impressive figure, he slouched and avoided all eye contact. Strangely, though, every other Death Eater – Bellatrix included – paid Rookwood a kind of reverence. No jokes were made at his expense, no jealous looks were sent his way and no move was made to involve him in the conversation. It was almost as though they were ignoring him more ardently than they were Harry.

When it came to Regulus, Harry was in no doubts. He said nothing because of fear. He was on the lowest rung, both in terms of his position as a Death Eater and age. Many snide jokes were made

about him, and he did nothing but sit there, pale and terrified. Bellatrix, in particular, took joy in ripping him to shreds despite Rodolphus's pointed looks.

"Is that Celestina Warbeck?" said Travers, pointing at the raised platform.

"Try not to wet yourself," sneered Avery.

Harry glanced at the stage, which now held a leggy, beautiful witch dressed in red. She clapped her hands once, and the light dimmed, so that only the children's table was illuminated – more specifically, a very young child with platinum blonde hair; Draco. The source of the light soon became evident – it was a gargantuan, many-layered cake as intricate and ornate as the hall itself.

"Happy birthday to you," she sang, her soft, angelic voice echoing off the walls, "happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Draco, happy birthday to you!"

During the song, Narcissa and Malfoy had joined their son. Draco blew out the two candles (with some help from his mother) to rapturous applause. Malfoy held a knife and let his son hold the hilt as he cut the first slice.

The torches were lit again and sizeable slices of cake appeared on the silver plates in front of them. Malfoy raised a hand and all talk died immediately.

"I would like to propose a toast," he said, raising a glass above his head. Harry was expecting a long speech, but instead, "To Draco."

"To Draco," came the reply.

Harry sipped his drink and took a bite of the cake. It was extremely sweet and had a very delicate texture to it, as if it were made of pieces of cloud.

The conversation resumed, and Harry wondered when he would slip away. Too soon and he would be caught, too late and he would run out of time. He glanced over at the children's table, where Dora was spoon-feeding Draco the cake, wiping any that got on the edges of his mouth. Harry smiled despite himself. How does Voldemort turn them against each other?

"What are you smiling at, Potter?" said Snape, glaring at Harry through his beady black eyes.

Throughout the entire night, there had been one moment of innocence, one moment without falsehood and Snape had to stick his long nose in. Angered, Harry said, "Human kindness, actually. Not speaking your language, am I? It's what Lily used to show you before you spat it back in her face." Harry regretted it instantly; he knew he had gone too far.

Silence.

Snape stared at him more angrily than Harry had ever known; angrier even than when Harry had stumbled across his worst memory. It was pure, unadulterated rage.

Then, "Sectumsempra!"

Harry deflected it with some difficulty. It grazed past Regulus's arm and instantly, the cloth of his expensive robes was ripped to shreds and a deep, bloody gash appeared. Regulus yelped with pain.

Quick as a flash, Malfoy appeared from behind the fountain and bore down on Snape, who had turned deathly pale, his chest heaving underneath his black robes.

"Get out," said Malfoy, his grey eyes icy chips, his voice laced with suppressed fury.

"It was Potter –" began Bellatrix, but Malfoy silenced her with a back-handed slap to the face.

“For once in your life, hold your tongue, you stupid girl.” She clutched the bright red mark it had left and stared at Malfoy with horror.

Malfoy turned to Snape, who appeared frozen with fear. “Did you not hear me?” He leaned in towards Snape and whispered, “Leave now, you disgusting half-blood.”

Snape stood shakily and did as he was told.

“If the rest of you children cannot behave,” hissed Malfoy, “you will pay the consequences.” He gazed at Regulus, who was rapidly losing blood, indifferently. “Go and help him clean his wounds, James.”

With that, Malfoy returned to his table, leaving a deathly silence in his wake.

Harry rose and dragged Regulus to his feet. He could feel the eyes of every guest on him. As fast as he dared, he steered Regulus out of the room, much in the way he himself entered it. A trail of blood followed them.

Once they were out of sight of the hall, Harry sat Regulus on one of the mahogany benches underneath a glass window stained gold. Light from outside filtered through and gave Regulus an almost ghostly appearance. Harry cast a charm to clot the flow of blood.

“I don’t need your help,” whispered Regulus.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” said Harry.

He cleaned up the wound as best he could and clumsily closed the gash. It was temporary, but the Academy had not taught him anything permanent. The boy would just have to make do for now.

Harry turned his attention to the empty entrance hall. He knew there was somebody there, but they were stood too still for Harry to pinpoint them. Instead, he silently cast the Muffliato. It was time for him to use the knowledge he had learnt.

“What are you doing to yourself, Regulus?” said Harry.

“What?”

“You’re no Death Eater, we both know that.”

“I don’t know what you are –”

“Don’t give me that; we both know what I’m talking about. You’re young, Regulus, and you don’t realise what it means to be a Death Eater, or what a pawn you are to Voldemort.”

Regulus paled. “You...you spoke his name.”

“It’s only a name. There is a way out for you –”

“There’s no way out,” said Regulus, with barely suppressed fear. “It’s a lifetime of servitude or death.”

“No, there is a way out. There are those who don’t fear the Dark Lord –”

“Dumbledore can’t help me. Nobody can.” Suddenly, he looked up as though he had only just realised he was talking aloud. “A-And I don’t need help! Leave me alone, James.”

“You’ll realise soon enough,” said Harry quietly, “and when you do, make sure to come to me, not Sirius.”

“W-Why?”

“You hurt your brother, Prince Regulus, you hurt him good.”

Harry left Regulus on the bench and made as though he was returning to the party. As he expected, he could hear the faintest sound of robes moving. He smiled. His stalker was inexperienced – careless, even. Without breaking step, Harry cast a Thermosensory

Charm over his shoulder. He rolled out of the way of a Bone-Breaking Hex and cast a well-placed stunner at his opponent, whose outline was glowing red like a silhouette.

Harry moved the body beside the wall and cancelled the Thermosensory Charm. For all intents and purposes, there was nobody there. He glanced down the hallway at Regulus, who was staring at the floor, lost in his own thoughts. Satisfied that he had not been seen, Harry cast a Silencing Charm at his feet, froze his robes and Disillusioned himself.

The music from the party grew fainter and fainter as he drew closer to the drawing room, like a dream. Regulus did not react as Harry slipped past him. Instead, he stood up and trudged in the opposite direction.

The oak doors to the drawing room were slightly ajar, and Harry was able to squeeze through the gap between them without causing a disturbance. The room was dark, lit only by the moonlight pouring in from the high windows. Harry squinted and blinked, waiting for his eyes to become accustomed to the lower light. There was ornate furniture, including a long table, but Harry was only interested in the far wall, where he knew a secret passageway existed.

An intricate tapestry depicting a powerful-looking man on horseback stood where the entrance had been when Harry was held captive at the manor. Being in the room brought back memories of torture, blood and death. Memories he had worked to put behind him.

He approached the tapestry warily. The entrance was behind it, he was sure of that, but how to get to it? Harry slowly extended his hand and touched the tapestry, just below the horse. He passed his hand over the finely stitched thread, and searched for the slightest weakness where somebody had worn away the thread through rubbing it, or tapping it. The tapestry was not very large, and it did not take Harry very long to find a slight groove over the Malfoy coat of arms in the bottom right-hand corner.

Harry prodded it, but nothing happened. He tapped it once, twice, three times. Again, nothing. He tried using his wand, but the tapestry

would not budge. Small beads of sweat began running down his face, and his glasses kept slipping down his nose. It would only be a matter of time before Malfoy noticed Harry's absence.

"Is it passworded?" thought Harry aloud. He glanced up at the broad-shouldered man in the tapestry, but he did not move.

He kicked the groove in frustration and, to his surprise, the entire structure swivelled and Harry was thrown into a dark passageway.

Harry gingerly stood up, reeling from pain and surprise. He registered the complete darkness and whispered, "Lumos."

An inch from his feet was a steep staircase that seemed to lead into an endless chasm of darkness. Regaining his composure, he slowly descended, being careful not to trip. The thin light from his wand sliced through the darkness and revealed a heavy door. Suddenly aware of the time pressure, Harry hurried down the last few steps and quietly opened the door with a lazy flick of his wand.

Behind the door was a small, dank, dusty room. It was not plunged in darkness, as Harry remembered, but lit by torches along the walls.

Harry stopped in his tracks.

Lucius Malfoy was seated in the centre of the room. He was smiling sadly. Over his shoulder, Harry noticed three ancient scrolls lying on an old, oak desk. Malfoy followed Harry's gaze, his eyes narrowing.

"I'm impressed," said Harry, buying some time, "how did you get here so quickly?"

"You forget you are in my house. I must say I'm disappointed, James. I invite you to my house out of the kindness of my heart and you repay me with public disrespect and attempted theft. I admit, I expected better. Did you truly believe I would not see through your plan? Were you naive enough to assume that bringing Andromeda Tonks would not raise eyebrows?"

Harry assessed the situation. Malfoy had the scrolls; Harry would need to take Malfoy out if he wanted to lay a hand on them. As if reading his mind, the scrolls vanished with a flick of Malfoy's wand.

Harry had failed.

"What can be done with you?" said Malfoy, shaking his head solemnly. "I give you chance after chance to realise the undeniable truth; Dumbledore will fall. You put your trust in a manipulative old man rather than your own flesh and blood, your last living relative. But you never listen, do you?"

"Well, I shall speak quite candidly to you, in a language you will understand. You are nothing but a spoilt, arrogant little boy who sees nothing beyond his own inflated sense of self-importance. You are not fit to bear the name Potter. You strut about jobless, eating into funds you scarcely deserve, doing everything in your power to embarrass your heritage. You are worse than a Black and I am ashamed to call you my cousin."

"Now let me tell you something, Lucius," snarled Harry. "You follow Voldemort, a half-blood, around like some lapdog, doing exactly as you're told, cowering and grovelling on demand. And to this day, you don't realise that to a man like Voldemort, everyone is dispensable. He is friendless and alone and it will always be like that. You want to know who the real Voldemort is? Research the name Tom Riddle. When you do, you'll realise what a lie it is you're living and what danger you've put yourself and your family in. Or have you forgotten what the Cruciatus Curse tastes like? One of these days, you're going to fall out of his favour, and when you do, you'll know that joining him was the biggest mistake you ever made."

Lucius stared at him coldly, but Harry could see that he had ruffled the man's feathers.

"Leave," said Lucius. "I never want to see you here again. There will be no more invitations. You will stay away from my wife and son; they are no longer your family. I will no longer clean up after your mess –

yes, it is I who convinces the Ministry to drop charges time and time again. After all I have done for you...

“You hurt me, James, you really do. Get out.”

Harry spared Malfoy one last look of contempt. Malfoy's cold eyes glinted – was it the light? Was it regret? Was it sadness? Whatever, it was, it disappeared almost immediately.

Harry first activated Andromeda's and Dora's Portkeys before his own pulled him at the navel and Malfoy disappeared in a swirl of white light.

Chapter VI: Zonko's

A tumultuous week had culminated in the unexpectedly light breezes making way for the bitter gusts of November. As Harry marched down the deserted cobble streets of Hogsmeade, his failure to retrieve the scrolls a week earlier weighed heavily on his mind. Dumbledore, always the optimist, assured him it was mission accomplished – they now knew where the scrolls were located, he claimed. But as far as Harry was concerned, it had been nothing short of a disaster; Lucius Malfoy had worked out what Harry had been after and would no doubt move it. Hell, Voldemort would probably keep it on his person as he did Nagini at the battle of Hogwarts. His only hope now was that there was a copy somewhere, and that Zonko knew someone who could locate it.

He turned the corner and found two Aurors in the distance, forcing him to come to a halt and consider his options. Some gravel scraped behind him. Harry drew his wand and whirled around. There was nothing there. Probably a rat, thought Harry.

He drew himself to full height and approached the Aurors confidently. It took four strides for them to notice him.

“Stop there!” called the Auror on the left. She was short and slim with the kind of face only a mother could love. Her partner, who towered over her, was undoubtedly a younger Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Harry obeyed them and waited for them to approach.

“For your safety the Ministry advises you do not leave your home after nine pm,” barked the Auror. “It is now ten, please state your business here.”

“I have an appointment with Mr Zonko,” said Harry.

“A likely story! Are you aware that all ‘dark creatures’ have an obligatory six pm curfew which is punishable by a ten year sentence in Azkaban?”

“Yes, I’m quite aware,” said Harry, having read Crouch’s first popular decree in the Daily Prophet that morning. “Fortunately, I’m not a ‘dark creature’.”

“Prove it,” hissed the Auror.

“It’s impossible to prove a negative,” said Harry, growing a little aggravated.

“Relax, Mandy,” said Kingsley, “this is James Potter. Please, Mr Potter, continue with your journey.”

“Thanks.” Harry moved past the short, fuming Auror, who was whispering furiously at Kingsley. He could not help but roll his eyes; she was the type of Auror he had hated – the ones doing it for personal glory.

As he approached, Harry noticed that the lights on the most colourful shop in Hogsmeade were dimmed, and it appeared deserted. He rummaged around for the card he had been given at the party and raised it above his head as he passed through the glass door. He felt as though he had been forced through a cold shower.

“Mr Zonko?” Harry called.

“In the back!” Zonko’s gravelly voice came from somewhere behind the counter.

The shelves were bursting with merchandise, most of which Harry did not recognise. He meandered towards a shelf decorated with bats and picked up a vial fashioned into the shape of a fang. Blood of the Undead – scare your friends for half an hour! Smiling, Harry put the vial back in its position. He found it strange that, after a day’s business, there were still so many products. George’s shelves would usually be practically empty after a good day. Not only that, but the shop seemed far smaller than Harry remembered, but perhaps that was because he was used to the palatial megastore George had converted Zonko’s into.

Harry went through a door behind a counter and found Mr Zonko seated – no, slumped – in a moth-eaten wooden chair behind a round coffee table, most of him drenched in darkness. The strands of greasy brown hair at the back of his head was sticking up in all directions and he clutched a bottle of Firewhisky in his right hand.

“Would you like a drink, James?”

“No, thank you,” said Harry, suppressing a cough. The pungent stench of alcohol and smoke lingered in the air like urban pollution on a hot, dry summer’s day. The smouldering butt of a cigar lay on the table beside Zonko’s round glasses.

“Your father always refused, too,” he said, brandishing his bottle like a flag.

Zonko moved into the light from the dying, flickering embers of the fire in the corner of the claustrophobic back room. His blood-shot eyes were framed by dark, purple rings; his skin was pasty and yellowing.

“Are you alright?” asked Harry, sliding into the equally decrepit chair Zonko offered. It creaked worryingly as Harry put his weight on it, but did not collapse.

“Yes – well, no, I suppose.” He drew a cigar from chest pocket and lit it. “Want a smoke?”

“No, thanks,” said Harry, gazing at the revered entrepreneur worryingly. Harry had met him once, albeit briefly, in his own world, and he had seemed as imperious, charming and self-controlled as he did at Malfoy’s party; the very antonym of the man opposite him.

“You’re missing out.” Zonko’s eyes slid out of focus as he took a long drag before releasing a mushroom of smoke up towards the low ceiling. Between the smoke and the dying light, Harry could barely see the man he was addressing.

“What’s wrong?”

“Noticed the healthy stock out there, eh?” Zonko laughed gruffly. “Business, dear James, is bad...very bad, actually. This bloody war...it’s been squeezing me...bleeding me dry, to tell you the absolute truth.” The flash of glass told Harry Zonko had taken another swig of drink.

“Explain the problem,” said Harry, leaning forward. He could just about make out the bald patch at the top of Zonko’s head gleaming in the firelight.

“I believe in peace...peace has made my fortune. In the aftermath of Grindelwald’s demise, your father invested heavily in me, and business was good. As the economy recovered, employment shot up, which meant folks had the cash to spend on the superfluous, on Zonko’s Limited.” Another cloud of smoke. “Student numbers were on the up again and the headmaster kindly introduced term-time visits to Hogsmeade. Those were the days, James...”

“But now people aren’t willing to spend,” said Harry, breaking the wistful silence.

“If only that were it. I mean, I can – could – afford to advertise; the public could have been convinced to spend. No, it’s a far bigger problem I’m facing. War hits the economy like a Bludger to the head; the old, rich families curb their spending and move money into off-shore accounts; students’ parents are disappearing left, right and centre; the Minister has forced the headmaster to cancel Hogsmeade trips and the piece of shit Ministry is killing our subsidies.

“I’ve been taking out loans I can’t repay, I’ve made so many staff cuts I’m basically running on empty and I’m slashing prices right down. But what difference does it make when folks are too damn terrified to come into Hogsmeade? After what happened to McKinnon –” Zonko shuddered “– it’s a bloody ghost town!

“And the Death Eaters! Those...those fucking Death Eaters! You know what they’re doing? You know what those no-good cowards are doing? Buying everything up! They cripple us, then pick us off when

we can't fight back! They already own Borgin and Burke's, Fortescue's, Malkin's, Scrivenshaft's and the list goes on and on –"

"How are they doing this?"

"Oh, it's all very clever, no less than you can expect from Saint Lucius –"

"Do you have any evidence of Malfoy's involvement?" said Harry sharply.

Zonko took a long drag and laughed dryly. "Evidence? This isn't a time to make jokes, James, I'm baring out my soul here. So, where was I? Oh, yeah, they barge in unannounced and claim they'll save you from sinking. Of course, the poor, defenceless shopkeeper has no choice but to accept the take-over bid or face bankruptcy...or worse."

"You've resisted them?"

"Of course! I refuse to be a jewel in their crown – I'd rather die. A few weeks ago, on a night like this, three of them barged in and made their bid. A thousand Galleons they offered – a thousand Galleons! That's Knuts, James, an absolute pittance. So I told them where to shove it. They weren't happy with that, I tell you!

"So they came back a week later with an offer of two thousand Galleons and, again, I rejected it. These animals have no idea of the long-standing formalities. It is tradition for potential investors to invite the business executives to lavish dinners, but these Death Eaters, they have no respect! They...they pushed me around, trying to intimidate me, but I rose above them.

"A few days ago, only one of them came. He must have been pretty high up to walk around without protection and his mask...it was gold. The way he spoke, James, I was...terrified. He made an offer of five thousand Galleons. Even when I'm pissing myself, I'm not stupid. We're talking about a business worth five hundred thousand Galleons! I thought I was going to die when I told him I wasn't going

to do business, but he...he just left. Or so I thought. The next morning, I opened the shop at six in the morning as I usually do, and found my thirty-thousand-Galleon racing broom snapped in half.” His voice quivered with barely constrained anguish as he said this. “Do you know how special that broom was? It was hand crafted by Nimbus Schroeder himself! It was so precious I kept it in a safe in my house! Those...those thieves...”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. He knew for a fact that Zonko’s near-mythical broom had sold for over six hundred thousand Galleons in a charity auction a couple of months before he went through the veil.

“Have they visited since?”

“No,” choked Zonko.

“Is there any way you can show me the memory? I may be able to identify the Death Eater.”

“No, but I think...I think it may have been Him.”

“Voldemort –” Zonko flinched “– has been out of the country for some –”

Zonko dropped his empty bottle of Firewhisky. It tumbled over the edge of the table and rolled towards the fire, where a small pile of bottles had built up. He reached out and grabbed Harry’s hand with both of his, uncontrollable fear marring his features.

“Please...please, James. You have to help me... I wouldn’t normally, but the circumstances...” He let out a strangled sob as tears trickled down his face. “I’m a dead man...dead... I’ll lose my business, my house, my wife, my daughter...”

Harry could not take any more. He jumped to his feet and whacked the new bottle of Firewhisky out of Zonko’s hand. It flew briefly, then smashed, covering the dark floor with oozing, spitting liquid.

“Pull yourself together,” snapped Harry. “Stop drinking, stop smoking and listen to me.”

“They’ll be back, James,” mumbled Zonko, rocking in his chair. “You don’t know...they won’t rest until I’m attached to their strings. What will they destroy next? M-my daughter’s neck? I-I can’t I-lose her! She’s all I...all...”

Harry grabbed Zonko’s thin arm and pulled him up. He cast a mild Sobering Charm at the entrepreneur, who began vomiting. Disgusted, Harry vanished it as it emerged from Zonko’s mouth until he stopped retching and looked as though he was going to pass out.

The loud crack of inexperienced Apparition came from beyond the door. Harry tensed, and arranged the smoke so that it covered him.

“Daddy?”

It sounded like a girl, possibly a young woman.

“In here!” called Zonko, almost incoherently.

There was some coughing as the door opened. A pretty young girl emerged; she shared Zonko’s piercing blue eyes but little else.

“Potter?” she said, confused. She caught sight of her father and sighed, the sigh of a girl who had seen her father drunk many times before.

“This isn’t the first time?” said Harry, as she rushed forward to help her father, who was slipping in and out of consciousness.

“What are you doing here?” she snapped.

“I’m trying to help –”

“We don’t need your help,” she said shrilly.

“With all due respect, you do. Now, I must ask about the wards around your –”

“I said we don’t need your help! We don’t need you to poke your nose where it isn’t wanted, pretending to be chivalrous when really you’re nothing more than a bully who –”

“Your father’s business is failing,” snapped Harry, “and he has Death Eaters after him. Now, I don’t know you well enough to make judg –”

“Don’t know me? Don’t know me? What am I, then, just another conquest? Are we just nameless, faceless statues to you –”

“I apologise, but you have to think about what’s best for you and your family. You are in immediate danger. I’m sure you don’t know the full extent of the war or you wouldn’t be –”

“I don’t know the full extent of the war? Me? My best friend was killed by Death Eaters, they’re after my family now and Regulus –” She covered her mouth with her hand, and her eyes bulged.

“What did you say?” said Harry.

“Nothing. Just butt out, Potter.”

“What did you say about Regulus?”

“I won’t let you drag him into this, especially not after what your boyfriend disowned him.”

Harry took a breath to calm down and grabbed her arm. She gasped and jerked it away as if she had been burnt. “Look, I’m genuinely trying to help you here,” said Harry. “My father was friends with yours, and I want to honour that. I’m sorry about the past, but you’ve got to think about your own safety. You need to seriously consider the Fidelius.”

“We can’t,” she whispered. It was as though all her energy had evaporated and left a destitute, vulnerable young girl.

“You must. It’s the only way to hide from them.”

“I – We c-can’t hide from them.”

“They’ll kill you.”

“We’re dead anyway.”

Harry stared at the girl in front of him, no older than eighteen and saw a piece of himself in her. There was anger, and regret, and resolve.

“They won’t get you,” said Harry quietly, “I’ll make sure of that. I know people that can hide you more completely than you will ever know...”

“Professor Dumbledore?” said the girl, panicked. “No, we can’t accept his help. We...we’ll manage –”

“No, you won’t. I’ll talk to your dad in the morning about warding your house and I’ll personally guard the shop. All I ask is for you to answer a question of mine: has your dad ever mentioned Nebuchadnezzar’s Archway?”

“Err...a few times. He’s really into the ancient wonders; you should see the junk we have in the house.”

“Thank you,” said Harry. “Don’t linger here, go straight home.”

She looked at Harry as if seeing him for the first time and opened her mouth to say something. But Harry broke the gaze and left the room, his mind buzzing. Zonko was in a bad way; that much was obvious, and he needed help. Fortunately, he also had some knowledge of the Archway. Harry would go undercover as an employee and wean some information from him. At the same time, he’ll wait for the Death Eater to show his face, tail him, corner him and take the information

about the scrolls' new location from him. If worse came to worse, he would make the Death Eater retrieve the scrolls for him.

Harry emerged into Hogsmeade's main road, deserted and dark and still. Quickly as he could, he spun around and cast the Summoning Charm. There was a whoosh as Lily appeared and the silvery invisibility cloak flew into Harry's outstretched hand.

"I know this cloak too well for you to trick me, Lily. Well, that, and you're not very good at going undercover."

She recovered from her surprise quickly and grinned, unabashed. Harry glanced up and down the road for any signs of life. Nothing. As a precaution, he motioned for Lily to follow him. He led them down a derelict side-alley and cast three layers of secrecy charms. Better safe than sorry.

"What are you doing here?" snapped Harry.

"I could ask you the same question," said Lily, her arms folded.

"I'm not the one trying to edge out Dumbledore in Voldemort's to-kill list," hissed Harry.

"Actually, you are. Or have you forgotten..."

"I'm a trained Auror, Lily, and I know these Death Eaters like the back of my hand. If I detected you, so could they. They probably have the shop under surveillance!"

"I don't need to be mothered."

"I don't care. I'm not going to let you just...just throw your life away over nothing!"

"What, so you can prowl around then tell me I need to be locked up in a castle like some damsel in distress?"

“I’m just trying to protect you!”

“What gives you the right –”

“I’m your –”

“My what, Harry, my what?”

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. What was he? Not her son, she’s at least three years younger than me. He looked into her brilliant green eyes that shone with pain and regret.

“I’m sorry, Harry...”

“No, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be –”

“I was out of line; of course you care about me...”

“My best friend once said I have a ‘saving people thing’ and here I am doing it again. Look, I’m just worried; Voldemort’s almost definitely sending his people after you – you know that. They’ll want to lure you from the castle and I’d never forgive myself if something –”

Lily silenced him with a hug that encased him with warmth, rebuffing the icy winds.

“They don’t scare me,” she whispered, her hot breath against his ear, “not anymore.”

“Ah, the naivety of youth,” said Harry in his best Dumbledore voice.

“Old man,” retorted Lily, pulling away.

“Kids today,” said Harry, shaking his head, “they have no respect.”

“It’s getting a bit late for you, isn’t it, granddad?”

“It is, actually,” said Harry in his normal voice, “let’s head back.”

They trudged slowly and silently to the Shrieking Shack and Harry's thoughts turned to Wormtail. He considered using Wormtail as bait, or, even better, forcing him to take the scrolls. The only problem was Dumbledore. There would be serious problems if the headmaster found out Harry had taken the rat and used him for his own ends. And he would find out.

"Harry?" said Lily as they walked in to the Shack.

"Yeah?"

"Why are you helping Zonko?"

"What?"

"I didn't mean it to come out like that, but it's weird...there are so many families being t-torn apart by Voldemort – why Zonko?"

"Well, because he asked, I suppose –"

Lily sighed wearily. "Please don't lie to me, Harry. Why would you ask Adèle about that archway?"

"You know her?"

"Don't change the subject."

"He's a keen enthusiast in the ancient wonders. He's got contacts that might help to, you know, locate it..."

"Oh."

Harry crouched slightly to fit into the tunnel and wondered what to say next. Would she think he was trying to get away from her as soon as possible? Had he offended her? He opened his mouth, only to close it again.

“I want to go with you.”

Harry stopped suddenly, and Lily walked into him. He stumbled, tripped and fell on to the gravelly ground. Lily tumbled and landed on his back. He cursed as pain shot through both his hands and back.

“I’m so sorry!” gasped Lily, straightening up.

“No, it’s my fault,” grunted Harry, gingerly pulling himself to his feet. He stared at Lily searchingly and said, “Your place is here.”

“Sorry?”

“You can’t come with me,” said Harry sadly.

“Why? What do I have left for me here?”

“What would you have over there?”

“You, Harry. I know I’m not your mother or anything, but I-I want to go with you. Please let me help you.”

They emerged out of the frozen Whomping Willow and Harry sighed. “Fine.”

“So...what have you got planned?”

"Next, please."

It had been three days since his first day working behind Zonko's counter and already, Harry felt as though all life was being sapped out of him. His days mostly consisted of waiting to serve customers and practically praying for the Death Eaters to show their faces. And he was sick of drinking Polyjuice. So far, the only time he was not alone on the shop floor was in the first and last hours of the day. But he did not complain, because he knew it was worse for Lily, who spent the same hours braving the arctic conditions just outside the shop under the invisibility cloak.

Harry placed the items he had been handed on the single scale on the counter. It whirled for the briefest moment, then a ghostly, golden figure 'four' appeared, followed by a bronze 'nine'.

"That's four Galleons and nine Knuts, please," said Harry, looking up for the first time. He almost dropped the Fanged Frisbee in surprise. Narcissa Malfoy was impatiently rifling through an expensive silver purse, her arched eyebrows narrowed. Even without her finest clothes on, she emitted a striking radiance, almost as though she was more than human. It was not quite Veela-like – there was nothing false about it – but it had a far stronger pull on Harry's heart.

"What are you staring at?" she said. Harry snapped out of his reverie and his cheeks suddenly became very hot.

"N-nothing," he spluttered and placed the Fanged Frisbee into the bottomless bag that went with every sale. Narcissa tutted impatiently but said no more as Harry handed her the bag and took the money in exchange.

As she left the shop, he realised he was staring at her curved hips as they swayed ever-so-slightly from left to right. What's wrong with me? That's Lucius Malfoy's wife! Draco's mother! He shook his head slightly, as though that would cure him.

The last hour dragged on, not helped by the fact that there were no customers at all. Finally, his clock read 'closing time' and Harry began to lock up. The sales had been low again and he was sure Zonko would start downing some Firewhisky once he found out the record low sales revenue. He had begun counting the money when the front door creaked open.

"We're closed," called Harry without looking up.

"I have an appointment with Mr Zonko," came the reply.

Harry glanced up and barely concealed his relief. A Death Eater in a golden mask was approaching the counter. His jutted chin and dignified strut gave him away as Lucius Malfoy.

“Oh, it’s you,” said Harry. He was glad to see his nonchalance had startled Malfoy. “He’s in the back.” Harry returned to the counting but, from the corner of his eye, tracked Malfoy’s lazy progress into the back room. Quickly Disillusioning himself, Harry followed him in as the door swung shut.

Zonko, who had been writing a letter, blanched and made to stand up as Malfoy carelessly lowered himself on to the creaking chair Harry himself had taken days earlier.

“Please, do not stand on my account.” Zonko stole a glance over Malfoy’s shoulder, evidently seeking Harry out. Idiot, thought Harry. Malfoy followed Zonko’s gaze and stared straight at Harry, who made sure to stay completely still and utterly silent.

“W-What can I help you with?”

“As you know, I am here on behalf of the Dark Lord. He has professed a keen interest in purchasing your rather splendid business and is willing to pay a fair price for it.”

“I’m afraid to say it’s not for sale.”

“Now, now, let’s not be rash; you have yet to hear the offer.”

“My business is worth eight hundred thousand Galleons, I hope the price —”

“The Dark Lord is prepared to make a bid of one hundred Galleons.”

Silence. Zonko stared at Malfoy with disbelief and Harry could feel himself frown. Malfoy’s last offer had been five thousand Galleons — what had possessed him to make a bid that barely covered a week’s rent?

“That’s — That’s completely...”

“I think you should consider the finer points of the offer,” said Malfoy, his voice quivering with sickening glee. He slipped some sort of photo in Zonko’s direction. Harry crept towards the table, careful not to make a noise and stole a glance at what turned out to be a photo of Adèle.

She was flanked by two masked Death Eaters but otherwise appeared in good health. Harry squinted at her rolled-up sleeves and almost recoiled. The Adèle in the photo tried and failed to hide the Dark Mark on her left forearm. He flicked his gaze towards Zonko, who was staring at the photo with horror.

“The Dark Lord,” said Malfoy, barely above a whisper, “has been disappointed in your unwillingness to co-operate, Mr Zonko, very disappointed indeed. He is a generous man; he gave you a fair offer, but you spat it in his face. And the Dark Lord does not take kindly to such grossly offensive gestures. He finds them quite coarse.

“We are not cruel men; we seek to help out our fellow wizard. But when our fellow wizard eschews our kindness and scuttles to blood traitors such as James Potter, it fills the Dark Lord with disappointment.”

“W-What have you done with my daughter?”

“We are not kidnappers, Mr Zonko. Young Adèle came to us of her own accord. How she longed to rebel against the authorities you waste thousands of Galleons trying to bribe. Her family did not pay her enough attention and so we became her family. Oh, how she lusts for power.

“The Dark Lord, in his benevolence, can fulfil her dreams; he is, after all, the sole heir of the great Salazar Slytherin, founder of her former house.”

“This is blackmail,” hissed Zonko.

“Come now, let’s not resort to petty name calling or I shall become angry. When I become angry, I say things I shouldn’t to people who

have no business knowing it, and Rita is so easy to get a hold of these days. Imagine it: 'Heiress of Zonko's Enterprise A Death Eater'. Better still: 'Daughter Turns Wand On Her Own Family'. Poor form for a businessman, wouldn't you say?

"But accidents do happen, Mr Zonko, and that is the sad truth. I have been unfortunate enough to witness suggestible young Death Eaters being sent to their deaths in duels they could not possibly win. Many more have disappointed the Dark Lord and must endure his...displeasure..."

"Ok! Ok! Enough! I get it! Merlin..."

"You see now how generous this offer is? One hundred whole Galleons! Why, in the current economic environment, that can buy a modest cottage in the countryside."

"I need some time to make arrangements," rasped Zonko.

"Quite understandable." Malfoy stood and Harry side-stepped out of his way. "I shall be along tomorrow evening with the money." He strode to the door and as an afterthought said, "Don't expect Adèle home for supper, she has some frightfully important business to attend to." With that, he swept from the room, leaving Zonko sobbing uncontrollably in his wake.

Harry resisted the urge to comfort the poor man and followed Malfoy through the back door and out of the shop. But he was nowhere to be found.

"Lily," whispered Harry.

"He turned left into that side-alley," came her reply, somewhere over his shoulder.

"Did you manage it?"

"Yeah."

Harry broke into a smile. "Well done."

He Disillusioned himself and darted off into the side-alley Lily had pointed out. It was approaching curfew and without the sun, the temperatures had dropped below freezing. The result: the streets were deserted. Harry spotted Malfoy's blonde hair in the distance; the rest of him was shrouded in fog.

Harry followed urgently, he could feel Lily millimetres behind him. The shops thinned on either side and the road narrowed. Where is he going? They had expected him to Apparate to the Manor; they were poorly prepared for a journey by foot. He glanced at some of the buildings as he passed them – half a house, a shop that sold nothing but snail shells, a dingy pub whose sole customer was a hunch-backed hag. It was becoming increasingly sordid, but Malfoy persevered, occasionally stopping abruptly and taking a corner with the confidence of a man who knew the area well.

"Where's he going?" whispered Harry.

"I specified the scrolls; there was no loop-hole in the wording."

Very soon, the road widened again and Harry was sure they had left Hogsmeade altogether. They were in a squalid, grid-iron Scottish suburb. Tall, thin, brown terraced houses loomed at them, punctuated by the odd greengrocer or newsagent. Old, rusting cars parked so close together their bonnets touched gave the area an early twentieth century feel. The streets were completely empty.

The fog carpeted the entire area. The only sign that the sky existed beyond it was a hazy, crescent-shaped glow in the distance, beyond the outline of a great tower that dominated the skyline. Malfoy was becoming more and more difficult to make out as he slipped in and out of the dim light of the streetlamps that lined the streets. Harry closed the gap between them to three paces.

"Are you sure the spell hasn't driven him mad?" whispered Harry as Malfoy turned left. His voice felt strange, as though it was somehow sacrilege to break the deafening silence.

“Yes, I cast it perfectly and he reacted exactly as the book said...”

The tower seemed to grow out of the fog. Was Malfoy making for it?

“My God...”

“What?” whispered Harry, as Malfoy vaulted over a fence beyond which was utter darkness.

“That’s the Tower of the Damned.”

“What?”

Harry scrambled over the fence. They were in a small park with a single path running through it. Trees surrounded them on either side and Harry got the distinct feeling that they were being watched. Without the presence of street lamps, Malfoy had been swallowed by the darkness.

“It was originally built by Salazar Slytherin when he was thrown out of Hogwarts. Throughout history, it’s been used as a stronghold of Dark wizards who wanted to take Hogwarts. Grindelwald started using it in 1944 once he realised that the only way to win the war was to kill Albus.”

“I’m guessing Muggles can’t see it?”

“No. If Malfoy’s hidden his scrolls there, then it means Voldemort’s taking the tower for himself.”

“But why has it taken so long for him to take it? He’s Slytherin’s heir, after all...”

“Maybe...ah!”

Harry turned around, his wand drawn. “What’s wrong, Lily?” he said to the darkness.

“He’s...fighting...”

Lumos! The narrow sliver of light illuminated Lily, who had taken off the invisibility cloak. She sunk to her knees, eyes screwed shut, and began muttering under her breath. Then she stopped.

“I’m so sorry, Harry...”

“Did he break free?” said Harry, subduing the urge to curse at the top of his voice.

“Yes...”

“The Tracking Charm?”

“He broke that, too.”

“Don’t beat yourself up about it,” said Harry, helping her to her feet. “You did amazingly well; we couldn’t have come this far without you. And anyway, we know where he was going.”

“But what if he wasn’t?”

“I’m sure he was. Have you been there before?”

Lily nodded. “Sirius and James...”

“We can Apparate this last bit, then.”

He reached out his hand, she took it and they Apparated.

His vision cleared. A strangled cry left Lily’s lips.

Two men with identical flaming red hair lay dead in a dark pool of their own blood.

Chapter VII: Tower

Five men sat at one end of a long, mahogany table, lit only by a crystal chandelier. At the head of the table sat a thin man with high cheek bones, pale skin and jet black hair. Lord Voldemort. He was perfectly still, his bony arms rested on the armrests of the purple throne-like chair he sat upon. To his immediate right was a relatively young man with long, blonde hair and an aristocratic face. Lucius Malfoy. The man to Voldemort's right was ancient; his curly white hair fell to his shoulders, and so much hair covered his face that his reddish skin was barely visible beneath it. Romulus LeStrange. To the left of LeStrange was an extraordinarily handsome, barrel-chested man with his hair slicked back. Lysander Yaxley. The man to the right of Lucius Malfoy had pallid skin that stretched tightly over his face and a small, brown goatee. Antonin Dolohov.

"My friends," said Voldemort, barely above a whisper. "I have been away in the Far East for some time now attending to matters that require my delicate attention, matters that concern Potter's rise from the dead. I have returned only for a brief time. During this period, Lucius here-" He nodded slightly in Malfoy's direction "-has been overseeing our operations to some success, I hear."

"You are too kind, my Lord," said Lucius, his silky voice carrying almost as far as Voldemort's sibilant one.

"You could say that," said Voldemort, tracing a circle in the table with his long index finger. "Lysander, my trusted advisor, what news do you have for your Lord?"

Yaxley sat higher in his chair, as though the praise had given him a jolt of energy. "My Lord, I have excellent news for you. The outstanding Fortescue payments have been resolved, and I have personally seen to the addition of Madam Malkin's to our payroll."

Dolohov gave a low whistle – they had been looking to control Malkin's for some months now. Voldemort, however, did not give any recognition to the news. "Did I not say that Zonko's was our priority?" he said quietly. Beside him, Malfoy's lips curved into a small smile.

“My Lord,” said Yaxley, “we are continuing to work on Zonko’s. However, we can expect monthly returns of five hundred Galleons from Malkin’s – it is a most useful investment.”

“The returns from Zonko’s would be more than double that. You have disappointed me, Lysander. Lord Voldemort does not settle for second best.”

“Please, my Lord,” said Yaxley, “allow me one more chance and I will bring us the control of Zonko’s by any means necessary. After all, we have the girl...”

“If I may,” said Lucius, leaning forward a fraction, “the acquisition of Zonko’s should be a subtle affair, requiring great wit and intellect. On one hand, we may wait for Lysander to strong-arm his way to our goals, but on the other, I have taken steps towards succeeding in this particular mission and could complete the acquisition within the week, leaving Lysander to tend to business he is more suited to.”

“Zonko is not some mindless Ministry crone who requires a glimpse of gold to control,” snapped Yaxley.

“Nor is he a little old woman, cowering at the mere sight of a wand.”

“Enough,” whispered Voldemort and the two men fell silent at once. “Lysander, you have done well to maintain and expand upon our interests. However, Zonko’s will require time and effort you do not have available and for that reason, I shall allow Lucius to continue with his endeavours. I expect a majority stake by the next full moon.” The triumphant glint in Lucius’ eyes did not go unmissed by Yaxley. “Romulus, what news?”

“The best, my Lord. With some help from Antonin here, I located the Prewett twins. At Lucius’s behest, we killed one but captured the other, leaving a dead transfigured Muggle in his place. We have since received confirmation that Dumbledore believes both men to be dead.”

“That is news indeed,” said Voldemort. “Those brothers were no more than thorns, but I feel I must attend to the one who lived personally. You have made good progress, Romulus, old friend, and for that you will be rewarded. I assume you have taken this opportunity to turn the Order’s head?”

“Yes, my Lord,” said Romulus. “We sent Rodolphus after the Macmillans and Bellatrix after the Tonkses.”

“I see,” said Voldemort, staring briefly at Lucius, who squirmed a little in his seat. “And why was Severus not sent?”

“That is the news I wished to tell you, my Lord,” said Antonin, frowning deeply. “Severus Snape requests to see you; for what reason, he would not tell.” Voldemort stopped the movement of his hands and sat perfectly still, nostrils a fraction wider than normal.

“He would not tell even you or Lucius?”

“No, my Lord. We were forceful, but he would not relent. He is waiting in the hall.”

“Lucius, bring him inside. Give him one more chance to tell you. If he does not, send him through to my study.” With that, he stood and disappearing behind a small, arched door on the far side of the dining hall. At the same time, all four of the men waved their wands past their faces and their skull-like masks covered their faces. Their masks were not white, as the ordinary Death Eater, but gold.

Lucius rose slowly and went to the grand double door, almost twice the height of an average door. Behind them he found a man roughly his own height, but thinner and slightly more stooped. He was wearing his white mask. Lucius greeted Snape like an old friend, clasp his thin shoulder and leading him in.

Lucius noticed that Severus hesitated slightly as he entered the room. He was a smart wizard and would have realised that he had walked in on one of the most exclusive councils in Britain. The leaders of the

Death Eaters. The hallowed Inner Circle. The four men ordinary Death Eaters enviously termed The Knights.

“Mr Malfoy,” said Snape quickly, “may I have a few moments of the Dark Lord’s time?”

Lucius turned to Snape slowly. “The Dark Lord is extraordinarily busy, Severus. I can relay your message to him.”

“It is of the utmost secrecy,” said Snape – was that a note of pleading in his voice?

“On your own head be it,” said Lucius.

Snape made for the door the Dark Lord had entered minutes before. He knocked briskly.

“Enter, Severus.”

Voldemort was standing with his back to him, staring out of the arched window and into the velvety night sky. A majestic Boa Constrictor was curled up on a hearth rug by the crackling fireplace. The shelves that ran across the walls were laden with books, scrolls and what looked like scraps of parchment. There was, however, no table in this study, only an immense armchair facing the fire.

“My Lord,” said Snape, bowing. He had never been so scared in his entire life. After all, he had only been face to face with his Lord four times – once at his initiation, once to tell him the prophecy, once when he had begged for Lily to be spared and now for the fourth time. Lucius had always told him to treat the Dark Lord with nothing but respect – he was a fearless, merciful leader but his mood could not be predicted. Now that Snape was in his Lord’s presence, alone for the first time, he could not stop his palms sweating. What would the Dark Lord say of his weakness? He would have walked straight out of the room had his feet not been glued to the floor.

“You need not bow, Severus,” said Voldemort without so much as a glance over his shoulder, “we are not house-elves.”

“Apologies, my Lord.”

Voldemort turned around and fixed his dark eyes on Snape. “Do not be afraid,” he said softly. Voldemort approached the fireside and sat on his grand armchair. He conjured a smaller armchair beside him and motioned for Snape to sit.

Snape, so afraid he could barely move, sat in the proffered chair.

“Speak, Severus.”

“This is a matter of great sensitivity, my Lord, but I felt it required your attention. It concerns my captain.”

“Romulus?” said Voldemort, sitting a little straighter in his chair.

“Yes, my Lord. My captain has been telling many stories about your childhood –”

“What?” snarled Voldemort, and the venom made Snape wish he had never come to the manor. His reasons for doing so seemed feeble in the wake of the Dark Lord’s anger. He suddenly felt very vulnerable and more terrified than he had ever been. He looked around the room for a form of escape, but there was none. Behind him was a room filled with some of the most feared and powerful wizards in the world; the window was out, too – it was at least fifty metres from the ground. “Do not hesitate, Severus, my anger is not directed at you.”

“He said things, my Lord, that I am afraid to repeat here. Falsehoods that, if he were a lesser man, I would kill him myself for –”

“Tell me.”

“He said that you were a half-blood, my Lord.”

Voldemort did not move. The flickering light from the fire danced in his eyes. The only sign of anger were his flared nostrils.

“M-My Lord...”

“You have done well to tell me, Severus, and you will be rewarded. Bring Lucius to me.”

The scraping of wood on carpet told him that Severus had left, but he did not look up. He stared at the fire and saw Romulus’s face laughing at him. But in the end, only he, Lord Voldemort, will have cause to laugh. When he exacts his revenge against the wizarding world and they fall to mortality, he will remain – alone and triumphant.

“My Lord?”

He glanced up and lazily invited Lucius to sit.

“You will temporarily take charge of Romulus’s Death Eaters,” said Voldemort.

Lucius betrayed a flicker of confusion. “Is my Lord at liberty to share the reasons?”

“No. Just do as I say. Why must my Death Eaters disappoint me so regularly?”

“I would never –”

“It has been two weeks, Lucius, and still I have no Prophecy child. I must question your ability, or perhaps your commitment...”

“My Lord, I am unwaveringly committed to the cause – it upsets me that you question me so...”

“Long have you been my most trusted advisor, Lucius. I admit, you have been far more effective than your late predecessor, but it is only the present that matters and presently, you have failed in this menial task I have given you.”

“It is more difficult than anticipated, my Lord. The Potter boy has seemingly vanished and Dumbledore has placed the Longbottom boy under the Fidelius. My spies tell me the old man himself is the secret keeper. Your Death Eaters are attempting to extract further information from Prewett as we speak.”

“You were resourceful and cunning, once.”

Lucius blanched. “I-I have enacted an excellent plan, my Lord. It has come to my attention that Dumbledore has been fool enough to give Andromeda Tonks the Longbottoms’ secret. I have sent Bellatrix and some of Romulus’s men to...convince...her cousin to reveal the secret. I have set up two decoys to distract the Order while Bellatrix does her work. I myself shall accompany Bellatrix to the Longbottoms once the secret is ours. I will have the child for you by tonight, my Lord.”

“And if not?”

“I will not fail, my Lord.”

“For the longest time, your word was enough, Lucius. But these blunders you have become accustomed to worry me, I must admit. This is the most important mission you have led and as such, I feel I must give you some...motivation.”

“My Lord?” said Lucius, his fear almost tangible.

“I am expected back in the Middle East in mere hours. I shall return in two weeks. When I do, I shall have a magically powerful child awaiting me. You have a choice of three children, Lucius: Potter, Longbottom or your son.”

Lucius froze.

Voldemort waved a thin hand towards the door. “Leave me now, I must feed Vinnel.”

Sirius downed a shot of vodka and took solace in the burning feeling of it running through him. The pretty barmaid was eyeing him hungrily,

but he did not care. Nothing mattered anymore. James was dead. Harry was dead. Peter was alive. And there was nothing he could do.

He raised his hand groggily and motioned for another drink. The barmaid practically jumped at the opportunity to pour him another shot. She smiled at him as she passed him the cup and 'accidentally' gave him a perfect view down her top. They were a great pair, he had to admit. Maybe when he got more smashed...

He wished he had been killed rather than James. Prongs...he had had Lily and Harry to live for. Sirius had nobody. His only family had been murdered by Voldemort. Hot anger that had nothing to do with the drink coursed through him. He would get his revenge on the Dark Lord if it was the last thing he did.

"Mr Padfoot?" said the barmaid uncertainly. Sirius reluctantly looked up. "I have a letter for you."

He snatched the parchment and unrolled it. He recognised the handwriting immediately. Remus. He and James had figured him to be the traitor. How wrong they had been.

It suddenly struck him that Remus did not know what had happened to James. The thought was absurd, but his only living friend had been deep undercover amongst the werewolves for two months now. He occasionally sent owls out, but Sirius had no way to contact him.

Padfoot,

Our furry little problem is getting out of hand. Mr Crouch isn't helping matters. Mr Greyback in particular wants to see blood and I fear I may be next on the menu. I could be back sooner than we expected.

I hope the rest of the family are alright, especially the newest addition.

Moony.

Sirius felt a pang of fear for Remus. Why was he lingering? Why did he not get out immediately? Why was Dumbledore so intent in leading them all to their deaths?

A sudden pain gripped his right bicep; it was like he had been stung by a bee. His blood traitor tattoo. Andromeda was in trouble.

He gripped his arm and Apparated.

“Oh my God...” gasped Lily, an hour before Voldemort’s Death Eaters convened.

Harry tore his eyes from the mangled, battered, lifeless bodies of Gideon and Fabian Prewett, choosing instead to glance up and down the area. They were in a large, derelict clearing somewhere near a city, judging by the tower-block skyline. Thick, suffocating fog blanketed the entire area – the buildings may have been a mile, or a hundred away. The ground was carpeted with loose stone chippings and the odd patch of wild grass could be found here and there. But what caught Harry’s eye was the rocket-shaped tower rising less than a yard from the twins’ bodies. There seemed to be no doors; the only windows Harry could see had been boarded up. The entire, ancient structure seemed endless in the fog.

“Lily,” said Harry, but she was frozen in shock, or horror. “Lily!”

She jumped and slowly turned to him. “Leave the cloak here and go get Dumbledore.”

“Harry, they’re –”

“I know,” said Harry softly, squeezing her shoulder gently, “but you need to pull yourself together and get Dumbledore. Make sure he alerts the relevant Order members, too.”

Lily nodded numbly and Apparated.

Harry took the invisibility cloak and covered the two men. Luckily, they were built like Fred and George – short and stocky. In fact, their resemblance to the twins was uncanny. Seeing them like this brought back memories of the Battle of Hogwarts, of Fred...

Concentrate, thought Harry, the Aurors will be here soon.

Harry cleaned up the blood that had oozed outside the boundaries of the invisibility cloak. He disillusioned himself, held himself flat against the cold wall of the tower and cast a freezing charm around his immediate area. And he stood there, his teeth chattering silently, waiting for the Aurors to arrive.

And arrive they did. Four Aurors, all of them barely out of Hogwarts by the looks of it, appeared about a foot from Harry, who held his breath. They prowled the area, casting only detection charms.

“I’m getting sick of these false alarms,” muttered one.

“Shut up and start using Thermosensory Charms. That’s what Moody said we should use, didn’t he?”

“I dunno, I bunked that lecture.”

“Let’s just use them anyway, in case he checks our wands when we get back.”

“Yeah, he sacked Mandy after she did a fake search...”

One of the inexperienced Aurors cast a Thermosensory Charm directly at Harry, who remained completely still. The dust in the air was causing his nose to twitch and he could feel a sneeze developing.

“There’s nothing here, not even a Dark Mark.”

“Another waste of time, eh?”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

Seconds before they Apparated, two things happened at once. Harry sneezed and there was a rustle of bushes somewhere to his right. Shit.

“What was that?”

“It came from over there,” said one, pointing somewhere to the right.

“No, I’m sure it came from there,” said another, pointing almost straight at Harry.

He could hear the sound of light footsteps, but he did not dare move his head. The footsteps grew louder and, out of the corner of his eyes, saw something small coming towards him.

“Oh, it’s only a fox.”

The fox stopped beside Harry and sniffed his shoes. It was going to give him away. Beads of sweat were forming and instantly freezing on his forehead. The fox raised its hind leg, preparing to urinate on Harry’s leg. Even the incompetent Aurors would realise something was off when the liquid stopped in mid air and dripped down what appeared to be thin air. He tried to move his foot slightly to alarm the fox without alerting the Aurors, but it was persistent.

“Avada Kedavra!”.

A shaky jet of green light struck the fox’s leg, millimetres from Harry’s foot, and it collapsed into a lifeless heap. Harry breathed a silent sigh of relief. It was close. Too close.

“What d’you do that for?” snapped an Auror.

“Killing two birds with one stone. Moody told us to practice it, remember?”

“In your own time, not the field, you idiot.”

“This is hardly the field...”

There were four simultaneous pops and the Aurors were gone.

Harry breathed an enormous sigh of relief and replaced the Freezing Charm with a blast of heat. “Accio Cloak!”

The bodies reappeared and Harry collected his thoughts. This was no random Death Eater killing – it was extremely specific, down to the location and lack of Dark Mark. Harry needed to find out who had killed them and, more importantly, why. He would need at least two private investigators, a good pathologist and another Auror. In his own world, he would have an entire team of professionals and Ministry resources to conduct investigations, but he knew that he would have to work with minimal specialised help this time around.

Three pops. Dumbledore, Lily and a man Harry did not know had arrived. His tame brown beard covered his wide, square jaw. He had an effortlessly magnanimous presence; he commanded respect.

“Harry, this is Edgar Bones,” said Dumbledore quietly.

“Pleased to meet you,” said Harry, shaking Edgar’s muscular hand. “You must be getting senile in your old age, Professor, I’m James, remember?”

“Dumbledore has told me of your secret,” said Edgar, his words trembling with suppressed power, like a lion in a cage.

Harry dropped his false James-smile instantly. “He must really trust you to tell you things you don’t strictly need to know,” said Harry, half-joking.

“It’s only taken a decade or two of regular contact,” replied Edgar.

Lily gave a small, pointed cough.

“Right,” said Harry, catching the hint, “we’ve got two counts of homicide on our hands here. We can assume that the murderers are Death Eaters, but what we’ve got to work out is the underlying motive.”

“With all due respect,” said Dumbledore sadly, “I believe the motive is evident. Gideon and Fabian were outspoken against Lord

Voldemort and his activities. This was a politically motivated assassination.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” said Harry. “If it were an assassination, they would have taken them out separately and cleanly. I’ve seen the aftermath of a true assassination, and this has no signs of one.”

“He’s right, Albus,” said Edgar, stroking his beard in agitation.

“There are spell traces over here,” said Lily. Harry, who had been concentrating on mounting an argument against Dumbledore, did not notice that she had been examining the base of the Tower of the Damned.

“There was a fight,” said Harry, pacing up and down, “and there were heavy blood losses on both sides. My guess is the Death Eaters brought in reinforcements; there may have been half a dozen here by the end.”

“Why is there no blood?” said Edgar, who was crouched beside one of the twins. Harry flicked his wand and the blood he had hidden from the Aurors reappeared.

Dumbledore, who was both troubled and visibly upset, said, “I assume you rebuffed the Ministry-sent Aurors?”

“Yeah, the very recent magical residue will be from their bumbling investigation. Since when did the Ministry send Aurors that aren’t fully trained?”

“Since they started losing the war,” said Edgar.

“We need a pathologist,” said Harry, “an Auror or two and at least two investigators to get this done.”

“I do not understand you,” said Dumbledore.

“Well, we’re going to have to investigate this, aren’t we?”

Edgar and Dumbledore shared a look and Harry looked between them, confused. "We do not conduct investigations during times of war," said Dumbledore.

"Well, maybe you should. Maybe if you did, you'd be pre-empting and catching Death Eaters instead of running around like headless chickens."

"Harry!" gasped Lily. "That's no way to talk to Albus."

"I'm sorry," said Harry, unable to subdue the sarcasm in his voice, "but how many Death Eaters have the Order caught? You asked for my help, Dumbledore, and I'm giving it to you – if you want to win, you need affirmative action."

"Are you asking us to stoop –" began Dumbledore, but Harry cut him off.

"No, I'm asking you to choose between losing your people to the Death Eaters by inaction and redirecting half your resources towards attack rather than defence."

Lily looked ready to argue but Edgar spoke first. "He's right, Albus. We've spent so much time on the back foot because of our peace-time mentality; it's now time to play Voldemort at his own game. We need more people in the Ministry, people in the media and people who have skills beyond duelling. Fabian and Gideon are huge losses; Voldemort's killing our best people while we're only catching his worst. Alastor and I have been telling you this for months, but you never listen."

Dumbledore was caught between Edgar's unwavering conviction and Harry's resolve. He sighed. "Call Elphias from guard duty and replace him with Dedalus." Edgar nodded and Disapparated.

"Guard duty over what?" said Harry.

“Certain families who have not acceded to the Fidelius charm despite the danger they remain in. Lily, dear, are you quite comfortable performing the examination?”

Lily nodded fiercely.

“She’s a pathologist?” said Harry as she crouched beside one of the twins and whispered complex incantations.

“No, but she has been trained sufficiently and has a particular gift for charms.”

“So I’ve heard.”

Edgar returned with an elderly man Harry recognised as Elphias Doge. Aside from Bill and Fleur’s wedding, he had bumped in to him at a handful of charity functions and found him reasonably pleasant. Presently, they exchanged polite greetings.

“Elphias was one of the country’s leading private investigators before he resigned,” said Dumbledore. “He will concentrate on analysing the physical evidence while I shall attempt to interpret the lingering spell residue.”

“They always take the young,” said Elphias, shaking his head sadly at the sight of Gideon and Fabian’s dead bodies.

“It is cruel,” said Dumbledore. “Edgar was an excellent Auror before moving into politics. I suggest you search for additional evidence in the surrounding area.”

Harry nodded and, with Edgar in tow, set off. They spent at least half an hour traipsing around the clearing, trying in vain to find hints of tampering, eye-witnesses or more spell residue for Dumbledore to try his hand at. They came finally to the area behind the tower.

“Do you reckon there’s any evidence in the tower itself?” said Harry, squinting up at a boarded-up window.

“No, they wouldn’t dare enter the tower.”

Harry looked back at Edgar with confusion. “Why not?”

“Do you not you know why it is called the Tower of the Damned? Oh, of course you wouldn’t, I apologise. There is a curse on it, one they say was laid down by Slytherin himself. Any who enter without permission will lead a cursed life, one that is barely worth living.”

“Sounds like a myth to me.”

“How is Grindelwald faring these days? He was winning the war up until he first entered the tower. They say he went mad after that; he was an utter head-case when Albus eventually beat him. Even Albus agrees it is cursed and he is hardly one to fall for local myths.”

Harry was about to tell Edgar that Dumbledore was exactly the type of person who believed in myths when a gale of raucous laughter cut him off. He shared a look of alarm with Edgar before cautiously moving towards the cause of laughter. The eye-watering stench of some sort of strange potion filled the air. Seconds later, its source became apparent. A haggard old man dressed in tattered Muggle clothes was lying in a patch of wild grass, an odd-looking cigarette that tapered at the end dangling from his mouth.

“More...more of you!” he shrieked, waving a trembling finger at them. “I-I mean no harm! I come in peace! Don’t take me!”

Stupefy! The tramp keeled over and the cigarette fell out of his mouth.

“Let’s take him to Dumbledore,” said Harry. It would be easier for Dumbledore to use Legilimency on him than for Harry and Edgar to futilely attempt to wean some sense among the madness. In his own world, he had used the same procedure when dealing with Death Eater nut-jobs, except he had used Veritaserum experts then.

Dumbledore and Doge were deep in conversation when Harry and Edgar returned to the site and, from their frowns, it looked as though

they were arguing. Lily was persevering with the medical checks, stopping only to share a grim look with Harry.

“We have a possible eye-witness,” said Harry, nodding towards the tramp Edgar had floated in. “Do you want to work your magic on him?”

Dumbledore nodded unsmilingly. While he and Edgar busied themselves with the tramp, Harry turned to Doge and said, “Talk me through the evidence.”

“Ignoring the traces left by the Aurors, we have some substantial evidence here,” said Doge, frowning, “more than I’ve ever seen, actually. I’m certain that there were four attackers, but Albus believes there were five.”

“What does the evidence suggest?” said Harry, falling into a role that was familiar to him.

Doge’s stony face softened, as though he had been waiting for an opportunity to show off. “There are fibres from four different robes,” he said, pointing to a four different patches of ground. Harry had to squint to see the black fibres. “If we had more resources, I could have had them traced, but obviously, this is hardly a Ministry-funded operation. The quantity of the fibres startled me, actually – it was almost as though they wanted to get caught.”

Harry frowned. “That makes no sense whatsoever. You think they wanted to leave evidence behind?”

“It is a possibility we cannot rule out at this stage. Certainly the evidence suggests they were careless – perhaps they were new recruits.”

“And what is the evidence that there were five Death Eaters rather than four?”

“Albus has studied some of the magical residue, and he’s sure that they came from seven separate sources, including the twins, not six.

But it doesn't make sense – even he admits that there were only four Apparitions.”

“Maybe one was side-alonged,” said Harry.

“Maybe. What is clear is that there was an immense struggle – there are traces of non-Prewett blood here –” He pointed to one of several smatterings of blood “– here and here. Those twins were always wonderful fighters...”

“What about the actual spells used?” said Harry impatiently.

“Dumbledore reports traces of at least four Killing Curses, twenty-two minor Dark curses, seven Bludgeoning Hexes; typical curses one would expect in such a situation. However, there are a few curses that do not fit in to the general pattern; a Compulsion Hex and an Imperius Curse, both at Gideon. What's more, Lily says that Gideon was hit by a Killing Curse before any other attacks on his body.”

“What?” said Harry, his frown deepening.

“I am equally puzzled by it. What's more, Fabian was dying when he was hit by the Killing Curse –” Lily's arrival stopped him in his tracks and he looked at her expectantly.

“There's almost no correlation between their DNA,” she said. “And they were hit by the exact same curses. I don't...I don't think that's the real Gideon.”

Dumbledore and Edgar returned, their expressions grim.

“What did you learn, Albus?” said Doge.

“That poor man is a squib,” said Dumbledore quietly. “He and a fellow squib who call this clearing their home saw Fabian and Gideon fighting four men. The two squibs attempted to escape, but were confronted by a fifth man. At that point, it became very difficult to ascertain the correct course of events, for a strong memory charm

has been applied to him, one that has driven him to madness. What is clear, however, is that his partner was taken.”

Suddenly, it all clicked. “I think I know what happened,” said Harry and all eyes turned to him. “They fought with Fabian and Gideon and weakened them. Then the fifth Death Eater replaced Gideon with a fake and used a Portkey – it had been planned that way from the start. That’s why there were only four Apparitions but spells from five enemy wands. It also explains why the Gideon look-alike was hit by an AK first. Once he was dead, they mangled his body so that the spell-work on both bodies matched. But what doesn’t make any sense is why the plan was so well-planned on the one hand, but careless to the extreme on the other...”

“They wanted us to find the bodies,” said Lily. “They’d seen you visit Zonko, Harry, and worked out that you had made some kind of agreement with him. Narcissa Malfoy...she must have been scouting the area out for her husband. And when I put the Imperius Curse on him, he must have somehow managed to control the connection and led us straight here.”

“You put the Imperius Curse on –” began Doge, but Edgar silenced him with a look.

“And I believe I have the final piece in the puzzle,” the headmaster said. “This is so very like Lucius... I do believe we have been tricked, my friends. This attack was created in order to turn our heads while the Death Eaters attempt to take Neville Longbottom.” There was suddenly a sense of urgency in Dumbledore that Harry had never seen. “Elphias, Lily, go straight to the Macmillans and ensure that they are quite safe. Harry, Edgar, do the same for the Tonkses. Send for help if our worst fears are confirmed.”

“What about you, Albus?” said Edgar.

“ I shall return Fabian to headquarters and make for the Longbottoms. It is imperative that Neville is not compromised. Go now!”

There were five pops and silence fell around the Tower of the Damned once more.

Chapter XIII: Fire

The lane that led to the Tonks' cottage at the brow of the hill took a steep and, in Harry's opinion, unnecessarily meandering route. But it was the only way up, unless they wanted to brave the high, nettle-laden bushes that flanked them. The sun was setting behind the cottage and its crimson tendrils peaked either side of the cottage, giving it an unearthly beauty. They followed the path around a bend, and the house disappeared from view.

Harry and Edgar climbed the lane in silence. Apprehensive silence. Their shoes clicked against the hard granite. Their robes whistled in the light breeze. Their wands lay firmly in their grip.

"I'm sure they're fine," said Edgar, his short breaths saying anything but.

Harry said nothing.

He could not bear to think of the Tonkses in harm's way. Over the week he had spent practising for the Malfoy party, he had grown rather fond of the pair. Andromeda was quiet and composed at all times; she possessed a kind of profound wisdom even in her relative youth. Dora, however, was energetic, talkative and fun. She embodied joy in her every movement and never failed to make Harry smile. Harry had only briefly met Ted, and he too exuded warmth and kindness. The thought of an attack on them sickened him to his very core. He refused to contemplate it.

But the evidence at the tower was overwhelming.

The lane tapered off to the left and the cottage appeared from behind the hedge, far closer than before. It had none of the grandeur of Malfoy Manor, but its Tudor design – black beams on white walls – gave it a quiet humility the Malfoys could only dream of.

Edgar's throaty cry drew him from his musings.

"Harry...you'd better take a look at this."

He moved out of Harry's way to reveal a man Harry knew to be Dedalus Diggle dead on a bed of chrysanthemums. Fear and dread gripped him, like his stomach had frozen, or he was falling from a great height.

"Shit..."

"Merlin, he was a good man, Harry..."

"We need to get into the cottage," said Harry with panicked urgency.

Edgar nodded numbly. Harry led the way, sprinting over the well-kept lawn and plots of brightly coloured flowers. They were closing in on the small, oak door.

Harry felt it before he saw it. The Killing Curse had been fired, and its target was Harry. He threw himself to the floor. It passed over his head.

Instincts took over and he threw a Reducto in the direction the Killing Curse had come from. But it passed over the hill and out of sight. So the opponent was invisible. Well, this complicates things.

Beside him, Edgar had cast a Thermosensory Charm. Nothing.

"Disillusion yourself," said Harry, his mind whirring.

"What?"

A sickly-looking purple curse looked for Edgar's back, almost from point-blank range. Harry cast a Protego. Bong! Curse and shield met, and the shield won out. Harry sent multiple stunners in the right direction but none hit a target.

"Disillusion yourself and I'll become the target."

"I don't think –"

Another Killing Curse rippled through the air. Harry did not have time to react. The cloth covering his right shoulder rippled. The hairs at the back of his neck stood up. It had missed. Just.

“Just do what I say!” cried Harry as he looked for shelter. But there was nothing except an old oak tree and the house itself. “Disillusion yourself and climb that tree. Start firing when I raise my hand.”

Edgar disappeared.

A plan began to form in his mind. As the next curse appeared, he Apparated to the other side of the front garden and shot a Bludgeoning Hex at the precise spot the spell had come from. No luck.

He Disapparated and cast a Thermosensory Charm. And again. And again. And again. To his delight, a bright red silhouette appeared. Before the Death Eater could even contemplate his next move, Harry cast a Finite Incantatem. A particularly short figure, unmistakably masculine, appeared dressed head-to-toe in black robes, his face covered by a skull mask.

Harry rolled to the right and transfigured a dandelion into a large, smooth boulder. The Death Eater ducked behind the oak tree. They exchanged a furious flurry of spells.

“Avada Kedavra!”

A fragment of boulder shattered.

“Sectumsempra!”

Parried.

“Reducto!”

Reflected.

“Confrigo!”

Shards of oak flew.

Harry transfigured a nearby stone into a vicious, grim-like dog. The Death Eater conjured a swarm of bees. Harry raised his hand and spells rained down on the Death Eater from over his shoulder, from Edgar.

The end was near. Harry cast a Bubble-Head Charm and summoned a thick, black smoke that blanketed the entire front garden.

Serpensortia!

A dark, muscular Boa Constrictor slithered out of his wand and practically swam into the darkness. A scream, piercing and terrible. Harry banished the smoke. The snake was coiled around the Death Eater like poison ivy.

“Stupefy!” said Harry, and the Death Eater fell.

Harry did not stop and marvel. Instead, he sprinted towards the cottage, towards the Tonkses. He was at the door.

Then his shoulder exploded. He staggered and his world caved in.

His shoulder felt as though it was on fire, or a searing hot knife was repeatedly plunging into it, or lightning had struck it. It was beyond pain. Beyond agony. His eyes were unseeing to all but the shower of red, his ears deaf to all but the colossal pounding at the wound, his mouth numb to all but the nauseating taste of blood.

The offer of pain-free darkness danced in front of his eyes. He longed to take it, to relieve himself of the pain... But Andromeda! And Dora! Sweet, innocent Nymphadora! He resisted the waves of impending unconsciousness and groped for his wand with his good arm. Couldn't find it. Taking a deep breath, he raised his head. A fresh flood of pain coursed through him.

But the thought of the Tonkses gave him strength, or was it adrenaline? Or maybe he hurt so much his nerves had been

destroyed? Either way, he found his wand by his feet which, like the rest of him, were drenched in blood.

Harry managed to halt the bleeding. He could practically feel the blood trying to escape. It struggled against his spell. Next, he cleaned the blood before finally resorting to the most dangerous spells in an Auror's medical inventory: Widow's Gift. He would feel absolutely nothing for as long as necessary before the strain became too much and all the built-up pain hit him at once. The longer it was applied, the higher the risk of permanent damage. Better than bleeding to death, thought Harry as he practically jumped to his feet.

His vision cleared. Edgar was duelling with a new Death Eater, far taller than his colleague, and seemed to be on the back foot. Harry knew exactly what he would do. They were too close together for Harry to get a clean shot at the Death Eater, so he willed every drop of moisture from the surrounding grass to cover the Death Eater. Some gathered on Edgar, who faltered at the sight of millions of droplets collecting and did not see the Concussion Hex until too late.

Harry banished Edgar's unconscious form to a safe distance as the Death Eater spotted him. Harry transfigured the water into oil. The Death Eater, confused, fired spell after spell at him, but none hit their mark. He was panicking. Grimly, Harry raised his wand above his head and as he brought it down, a flame whip appeared and struck the Death Eater at the back of the shin.

Harry did not stop to watch as the Death Eater became engulfed in flame. Instead, he sprinted into the cottage, kicking the door in as he did so.

The narrow hallway was an absolute mess. There had been a struggle, one that caused the floor to become a bed of glass, gold and blood. Harry took a breath to calm himself down. There was no good in being rash. There were voices coming from the living room.

Harry crept into the living room, which held more signs of destruction than the hallway. The carpet was drenched in blood, the sofas lay in pieces and splinters of mahogany covered the floor. But that had not attracted his attention. Sirius, bloodied and battered, was pinned

against the wall, unable to breath, surrounded by three masked Death Eaters. He must have put in a real struggle, because two other Death Eaters lay unconscious on the floor, ignored by their cohorts.

Harry measured his opponents up. There had originally been five. Any five men had a ringleader, two enthusiastic followers and two reluctant followers. Take the ringleader and the keen sidekicks out of the equation and it was game over. That was one of the first lessons Harry had learnt in the Academy. There's no such thing as a five-on-one. But were the two on the floor the enthusiastic followers or the reluctant ones?

Rule one, be on your feet and ready.

Rule two, use your environment.

Rule three, identify the ringleader.

Harry raised his wand and counted on the three men hesitating. His fame had been good for ensuring him an extra three seconds in any given duel in his old world, and he guessed it was the same for James Potter, who was after all Malfoy's cousin and had supposedly defied Voldemort four times.

Rule four, the ringleader is always the one who moves first.

As expected, the burliest man stepped forward a pace and the others fell behind him in an arrowhead formation. So the enthusiastic followers were the ones directly behind the ringleader. Did that mean the reluctant followers were on the floor?

Rule five, never back off.

Harry took a step forward of his own but did not adopt a duelling stance. This always put pure-blood wizards off their stride, especially the arrogant ones who had spent years perfecting an intimidating stance.

The burly wizard hesitated once more, but Harry did not strike. It was up to the ringleader to make the first move so that Harry could dictate the duel.

Rule six, assess and evaluate.

The burly wizard was not going to prove a problem, that much was evident. Skilled duellers never hesitated more than once. They were out of the blocks with a powerful curse, like the Death Eaters outside. He wasn't a killer, either – assassins did not do confrontations. The first Harry would see of them, they'd be illuminated by the Killing Curse. No, Harry put the man in the 'average Joe' category. His inventory would be limited, his movement minimal at best. He would begin with a Bludgeoning Hex. That was Harry's best guess.

And Harry was right.

The burly wizard had made a grave error – he had shot a spell Harry was expecting.

Harry waited for the last minute, when the curse was within arm's reach, when the burly wizard thought he'd won. At that precise moment, Harry raised a shield then muttered, "Lumos Maxima!"

The burly wizard, blinded by the light, was taken down by his own deflected curse. Harry stunned him as he fell.

Rule seven, safety first.

"Expecto Patronum!" cried Harry, thinking of Ron and Hermione's wedding.

Prongs rode out, large and impressive as ever. He charged at the Death Eater on the left, who was not as large as the ringleader, but certainly wasn't small either. Behind the mask, his eyes were wide with fear as Prongs hurtled towards him, antlers down. Harry stunned him.

Then it was over, because the remaining Death Eater Apparated away. The last one always does.

“What’s going on down there?” yelled a woman’s voice, one Harry knew all too well. Bellatrix LeStrange.

Harry released Sirius from the spell he was under. For the first time, he looked like a boy; vulnerable and unsure, and Harry could smell alcohol on his breath. “Get outside now,” said Harry.

He half expected Sirius to argue against him, to tell Harry how he had no right to order him about. But instead, he nodded slowly and Disapparated.

Relieved, Harry darted out of the room and practically leapt on to the stairs. Then he stopped abruptly. Bellatrix was on the first floor landing, unmasked, with a gleeful smile playing at her lips.

“Why look who it is!” she said.

“Avada Kedavra!” hissed Harry. She dodged the curse, causing it to smash the wall behind her. Dust and plaster rained down on the staircase.

“Tut, tut, Potter,” she said, nonchalantly brushing some dust from her hair, “Dumbledore would be so disappointed.”

She sent her curses down, Harry sent his up, but none hit their desired targets. Bellatrix’s relish filled Harry with disgust. He feigned a curse, she went to block and Harry followed up with a Binding Curse just as she summoned his wand out of his hand.

For the first time in his memory, she registered fear as her feet snapped together. She writhed in the air for a split second, her arms flailing about in panic. Then she fell.

Harry stepped off the stairs and watched her fall, tumbling head over heels until her head hit the ceramic ground floor with a sickening crunch and she moved no more.

Frantically, he searched her for his wand. He rolled her body over with his foot. He froze. It lay in several shards, mangled beyond repair.

A shrill scream ripped him from his numb state of shock. Wand or no wand, he had to help the Tonkses.

Harry stepped over her body and bound up the stairs two at a time. The door furthest away from the corridor was wide open. Harry could see the shadow of a man. He ran into the room. What he saw forced the air from his lungs.

At the foot of a magnificent four-poster bed were Andromeda and Ted, shivering, sweating and twitching. Their eyes were open, blood-shot and unseeing. They were frothing at the mouth. Harry felt as though a shard of ice had been thrust into him. They had been broken by the Cruciatus Curse. The only consolation was that Dora was meant to be at a friend's house while Andromeda and Ted celebrated their wedding anniversary...

Harry's gaze fell finally on Regulus, who stood beside their convulsing forms, his face ashen. Harry's breathing grew heavier. His vision began to cloud with shock, despair, guilt and white-hot anger. All he could see was Regulus, the Death Eater, swathed in red. He could smell smoke, a testament to his fury. He had given Regulus a second chance. He had tried to help him. And the bastard had repaid him by destroying his own cousin.

He grabbed Regulus by the collar and slammed him against the wall.

"Where's Dora?" snarled Harry, a fresh wave of fear washing over him.

"I-I d-d –"

His fist connected with Regulus' high cheek with a satisfying crunch.

"WHERE IS SHE?"

“M-Merlin –” spluttered Regulus through a mouthful of blood. Harry struck a blow to his stomach. Regulus tried to keel over but Harry held him up.

“WHAT DID YOU DO WITH HER?”

“ P-Please –” Harry pulled his hand back and Regulus flinched violently. “N-NO! I-I’ll t-talk! P-Please!”

“Well?”

“B-Bella f-forced me –” He looked over Harry’s shoulder and tears began to run down his pale cheeks.

“Forced you to do what? TELL ME!”

“M-Merlin...k-kill m-me...k-kill me...”

Harry readied another punch when he suddenly became aware of the strengthening smell of smoke, not imagined as he first thought, and a faint crackling. He released Regulus, who immediately collapsed, and went to the stairs. His mind reeled. The entire ground floor was bathed in thick black smoke. He could feel the heat from where he was standing. Shit.

He returned to the master bedroom. Regulus had disappeared. Harry would deal with him another time. For now, he had to get Andromeda and Ted out of the house. His heart was pounding painfully in his chest. The smoke was drifting upstairs like a silent snake and the heat was making Harry sweat.

He grabbed Andromeda first and dragged her to her feet with some difficulty. He Apparated her to the edge of the front garden, and safety. Before he returned to the bedroom, he stole a quick glance at the outside of the house and swore. The Death Eater he had set alight was barely visible under a mountain of fire. It stretched out over the front porch and had engulfed the entire front of the house. And the cottage was made of wood.

Harry cursed again and Apparated back into the master bedroom. Quickly as he could, he Apparated Ted to safety. As he lay Ted on the grass, he realised he had left their wands in the room. The flames were now making rapid progress up the house. The entire hill was covered in smoke. He could hear the deafening crash of floorboards collapsing. Taking a deep breath, he Apparated into the bedroom.

Heat. Smoke. Destruction. Harry crawled on all fours as the smoke thickened above him. Crackling to his right. The doorway was being consumed by flames. He could barely breathe. He could barely see. The heat was killing him. And their wands were nowhere in sight.

He gave up and was about to Apparate when he heard it. A young girl coughing.

No...

“DORA?” he screamed, and the smoke rushed into his lungs. He coughed violently, but he had to find her.

He scrambled towards the sound of her wheezing coughs.

“DORA?!”

His skin felt as though it was on fire. He could see nothing in the black smog. He could not breathe. But he had to find her. There was no turning back.

He had to find her.

He groped blindly in the dark. Nothing but scorching heat. The flames were surrounding him. The floorboards were failing. CRASH! Something had collapsed. But he did not care.

He had to find her.

His strength was failing. The wound was reopening. Pain. Nothing but pain. He had one last ounce of strength. He reached out...

...and grabbed something! Soft, smooth skin!

And then darkness took him.

Chapter X: Ruin

Regulus Black was in trouble.

He could feel it. There was no other explanation why, at the dead of night, he had been summoned.

Through the slits in his mask, he could see the grand double doors he knew so well. How many times had he visited his cousin here, not as a masked Death Eater, but as a normal wizard?

He closed his eyes, intent on preventing the tendril of longing deep within him from consuming him entirely. Too late. Oh, how he wished he had listened to his brother! Sirius – Sirius knew, and had tried to warn him but he had stupidly ignored his older brother. And James! He had offered him a way out! He wished he had the nerve to defect, to become a blood traitor. He wished he had Sirius's courage, or Andromeda's intellect.

Why? Why me? I'm eighteen, for Merlin's sake!

He cursed Bella and her stories of wonder and false glory. He cursed his mother for allowing him to join the cause. He cursed the Dark Lord for making him do the most unspeakable things...

The image of his own niece's face as Bella forced him to torture her mother burned his mind's eye for the hundredth time. His eyes were stinging. He stared down at his hands. His coarse, traitorous, murderous hands.

Oh Merlin. Sweet Merlin.

He wished more than anything that he would be put out of his misery. That the Dark Lord would do what he, Regulus Arcturus Black, could not and finish him. He did not deserve to live.

And what would happen to Nymphadora, his own flesh and blood? Would James have found her under the Disillusionment? Had she survived the fire? Would she ever forgive the man who had destroyed

her life? No. She would one day find him and kill him. And it was no more than he deserved.

He ran his trembling hand through his hair and squeezed the back of his head as though it would remove the memory of Andromeda screaming.

Oh, Andromeda! The only family member to have ever understood him, and he had slaughtered her!

Merlin!

He...he had to stay strong for Adèle. She was all he had to live for. He had to subdue his monstrous self-loathing...for her.

Composing himself as best he could, he knocked on the door to the drawing room.

The door opened and Regulus followed the magnificent carpet into the dimly lit room. Even in the low light, it reeked of grandeur and wealth; perhaps it was the ornately carved table that dominated chamber, or perhaps the sumptuous chandelier covered in real diamonds. Either way, it did nothing to put Regulus at ease, but that was more thanks to the four men in the room, all of whom were wearing gold masks.

One sat facing the door, his legs crossed. He was sitting so straight Regulus guessed he was Romulus Lestrage, a man almost as rich and influential in pure-blood circles as Regulus's own family. Leaning against the wall nearest the door was a tall, powerful, broad-chested wizard. Regulus had worked out last week that he was Lysander Yaxley. He did not know much about Yaxley, only that he had graduated top of his class at Hogwarts ten years ago and had won an Order of Merlin for 'services to the Minister'. The shortest man of the four, who was sitting on the windowsill on the far wall, Regulus did not know. His mask was barely visible behind the cloud of smoke that coiled from his cigar and shrouded his face. This was the second time Regulus had encountered this man, and he still terrified him the most of the four, the Knights.

And finally, stood with his chin high in the air, was his own cousin's husband. The fantastically rich and cunning Lucius Malfoy. To Regulus's understanding, Malfoy was the highest ranking member of the organisation. He practically ran it. He was the cause of Regulus's melancholy. He had sanctioned the attack. He had orchestrated Mr Zonko's downfall. He had initiated Regulus into the God-forsaken family.

Regulus wished he could prove that the man behind the mask was Lucius Malfoy. Oh, how he would love to go to the Ministry, or even Dumbledore and tell the world who the men in the room were. But there was no proof, not even a shred of evidence...

"Ah," said Lucius, barely above a whisper, "the prince has finally graced us with his presence." He waved his hand royally and gave a bow. "To what do we owe this pleasure, Regulus Black?"

"I – I was recovering..."

"Oh, you were recovering! Forgive me; I shall endeavour to arrange meetings around your timetable next time."

"I rather doubt you can," barked Yaxley. "After all, I am sure young Regulus is rather busy entertaining the enchanting Adèle Zonko."

Regulus blanched; how did they know about Adèle? His heart pounded faster, so much so that he was sure it would give him away.

"Ah, yes," said Lucius, "it would not do to separate the future Witch Weekly's 'Power Couple of the Year', now would it?"

"I –I apo-"

Regulus was cut off by a chair sliding across the room of its own accord and hitting the back of his knees in such a way that he collapsed into it. Sharp pain ran up his leg, but he knew he could not whimper. It was what they wanted. And the pain was nothing compared to the feeling of dread that had weaved a web around him

and rendered him paralysed. He looked up into Malfoy's cold, grey eyes and found all traces of humour had evaporated.

But it was old Romulus Lestrangle who spoke first.

"Were you taught about the Ancient Egyptian wizards in that school of yours, boy?" he wheezed.

"N-No, sir."

"I thought not. Then you will be unaware of heka, the ancient Egyptian form of magic. In the nineteenth Dynasty, the Harim Conspiracy was uncovered. This involved several functionaries using heka as black magic. They used written magical spells, wax figurines and potions to attempt to kill Ramesses III. But their treachery did not go unnoticed and they received the ultimate punishment given to enemies of the state; all traces of their existence were removed. Their being was annihilated."

Regulus got the message loud and clear. He wished his shaking hands would stop betraying his terror.

"I ponder your position in the organisation, Regulus," said Lucius, "and I ask myself where your loyalties lie; to the Dark Lord, or your filthy half-blood girlfriend?"

A new wave of fear shot through him. "P-Please, sir, she is nothing to me. These rumours..."

"She is nothing to you? Why do you lie, Regulus? What do you mean by it?"

"I-I'm not lying! My allegiance is with the Dark Lord!"

"Oh?" said Lucius softly. He gave a lazy flick of his wand to reveal a body hanging upside down from the ceiling, no rope in sight.

Regulus' blood froze. No... Not Adèle... But there was no mistaking the black curls, and stunning blue eyes frozen in fear.

Terror gripped him. Not Adèle... not his Adèle...

“I suppose,” whispered Lucius, “that I can kill her, then? After all, she is nothing to you.”

“Not Adèle...”

“But why not, Prince Regulus?”

“Please...I’ll do anything...”

“Do you love her, Regulus?”

“Yes...yes...”

“Say it.”

“I – I love her! Let her go, please!”

“Young love,” said Lucius, savouring every word, “how beautiful.”

“I beg of you, release her! Take – take me instead! She d-doesn’t deserve...”

Lucius grabbed Regulus’s arm and roughly forced him up. He sunk his hand into Regulus’ shoulder and slowly steered him towards Adèle’s unconscious form.

“ Regulus, Regulus, Regulus. You are labouring under the assumption that I will listen to you if you plead like a woman. If I so wish, I will awaken her and make you torture her to insanity as you did your dear cousin. But I have far more important work for you to perform; work that may well aid both you and your, ah, lover.”

“Anything...”

“That’s the spirit!” said Lucius with mock enthusiasm. “Now, while your late cousin had been running around like a headless chicken, killing as she pleases, I have been formulating a new plan to retrieve a very important item for our Lord. Do you know what this item is?”

“N-no, sir.”

“A child, Regulus, a small child by the name of Neville Longbottom. If he is only a child, you may ask, why have I not found him? Simple: he is under the protection of that Muggle-loving fool, Albus Dumbledore. We suspect the child has been placed under the Fidelius, with the headmaster himself acting as the secret keeper. You know how the Fidelius works, do you not?” Regulus nodded numbly. “Had Bellatrix not made such a mess of the Tonks mission, I would have the child by now. But that is the problem with you Blacks; you never listen.

“Unfortunately for you, ignoring orders is not an option if you truly love your girlfriend. Now, am I to understand that your Occlumency has fully developed?”

“Y-yes –”

“Good. You will go to Dumbledore and beg him for asylum. You will tell him that the Dark Lord has captured Miss Zonko and you can no longer serve him. You will use Dumbledore’s forgiving nature and belief that love conquers all against him. You will say that Bellatrix had you under the Imperius Curse earlier. You will earn the old man’s trust by giving him names that I shall supply you with. You will worm your way into his Order of the Phoenix and, ultimately, receive the Longbottoms’ secret. You will kidnap the child and bring him to us alive. You will do this, Regulus, or watch your girlfriend die. Is that clear?”

Regulus opened his mouth, but no sound left his mouth.

“I said, is that clear?”

“Y-Yes.”

Lucius dragged him to the door with one hand, opened it with the other and pushed him out into the entrance hall with such force that Regulus fell and skidded across the polished marble floor.

“You have two weeks.”

The door slammed shut.

His life was ruined.

End of Part One

Author's Note:

Firstly, the Heka information came from *The Practices of Ancient Egyptian Ritual & Magic* by David Rankine.

Secondly, I hope you enjoyed it. Yes, it's very short, but I wanted it short. In some ways, it is a set-up for its sequel, which I am currently working on. I'm not going to say when it will be up, but I suspect I shall complete it before posting it. And this time, I'll post it all at once – this posting every few days thing grew rather tiresome. So that means you'll have quite a wait, but I hope it'll be worth it.

Thank you for reading *Ruin*.

Master Slytherin.